

# The Language of Humor

## *An Introduction*

Much of today's communication is carried out through various kinds of humor, and we therefore need to be able to understand its many aspects. Here, two of the world's leading pioneers in humor studies, Alleen and Don Nilsen, explore how humor can be explained across the numerous sub-disciplines of linguistics. Drawing on examples from language play and jokes in a range of real-life contexts, such as art, business, marketing, comedy, creative writing, science, journalism, and politics, the authors use their own theory of 'Features, Functions, and Subjects of Humor' to analyze humor across all disciplines. Each highly accessible chapter uses a rich array of examples to stimulate discussion and interaction even in large classes. Supplemental PowerPoints to accompany each of the twenty-five chapters are available online, taking many of the insights from the chapters for further interactional discussions with students.

ALLEEN PACE NILSEN and DON L. F. NILSEN are in the Humanities Division of Arizona State University's Emeritus College. Together, they have authored an abundance of books including *Literature for Today's Young Adults* (2013), *Pronunciation Contrasts in English* (2010), and *Encyclopedia of 20th Century American Humor* (2000). They are the leading pioneers in humor studies, having both received lifetime achievement awards from the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor and the International Society for Humor Studies.

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Don L. F. Nilsen , Alleen Pace Nilsen  
Frontmatter  
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Alleen Pace Nilsen and Don L. F. Nilsen  
*Arizona State University*



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## Preface and Acknowledgments

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In 1976, Antony Chapman and Hugh Foot hosted an International Humor Conference in Cardiff, Wales, which was the first such conference to be attended by a significant number of European and American humor scholars. In 1979, Harvey Mindess and Joy Turek of Antioch University in California hosted a second International Humor Conference, and in 1982, Rufus Browning of the Modern Language Association's American Humor Studies Association, along with Larry Mintz from the University of Maryland, and Herb Cummings from the Workshop Library on World Humor, hosted a third International Humor Conference. In 1984, Avner Ziv of Tel Aviv University hosted the fourth International Humor Conference, and in 1985, Desmond McHale of University College in Cork, Ireland hosted a fifth International Humor Conference. Except for the first Conference, we attended all of these, and benefitted both from the formal presentations that we heard and from the discussions about humor that went on in the hallways and on the buses and in the dining rooms, pubs, and dorm rooms.

In the meantime, both of us finished our Ph.D. degrees (Don in Linguistics from the University of Michigan, and Alleen in English Education from the University of Iowa), and we settled into our own academic careers at Arizona State University. Our university happens to be located in a geographical area which has a mild climate that every spring attracts visitors from around the world. In the late 1970s, we began thinking of hosting our own humor conferences as a way of celebrating April Fools' Day, when people were looking for a chance to get away from icy, cold winters and to spend a few pleasant days in the sunshine.

In the spring of 1981, we happened to notice a news story saying that Art Buchwald, a highly respected writer whose humorous political columns were published in over 500 newspapers, was going to be in nearby Scottsdale to speak to a convention. We wrote him a note asking if he could perhaps meet with a group of professors from Arizona State University and give us advice on how we could manage to put on an April Fools' Day humor conference that would attract a national audience.

He agreed to come to a luncheon meeting of several ASU professors who were interested in humor studies and were eager to hear what he thought about our idea. The most important thing he told us was that people would be disappointed, as they would come to a humor conference expecting to laugh for three whole days. He explained that no one can laugh that long and still enjoy it. We set about planning our conference and advertising it as being both for humor scholars and for members of the general public who just wanted to have fun. One of the positive things we did was to devise different kinds of events so that people would have choices. For example, we had a Friday night joke-telling contest, and on Sunday afternoon we offered a session for parents and their children to come and listen to the authors of humorous children's books.

Among the participants who helped us appeal to both scholars and to the general public were Joyce Saltman, Mel Helitzer, and Larry Wilde. We were happily surprised at how many people came, and even happier at the kinds of publicity we got because newspapers and television stations were searching for ways to acknowledge April Fools' Day. Even the nationally televised *Today Show* sent out a crew. Our first ASU Humor Conference was held in the spring of 1982 under the "sponsorship" of WHIM (Western Humor and Irony Membership) and the Arizona Humanities Council. But after a couple of years, when we saw that many humor scholars were coming from around the world, we decided that the W in WHIM could stand for "World" instead of for "Western."

Each year, we would collect copies of the papers that were delivered, and would publish excerpts (which we called *concretes* rather than *abstracts*), in a booklet that we distributed at the next conference. We used the title *WHIMSY* (*World Humor and Irony Membership Serial Yearbook*). We had six WHIM conferences, and six *WHIMSY* yearbooks, with each conference becoming larger and more international than the previous one.

Our conferences became truly international and included delegations of humor scholars from several different countries. One of the most active supporters of our humor conferences was James Boren from Oklahoma. His brother, David Boren, who had been both the President of the University of Oklahoma and the Governor of Oklahoma, and was at the time a US Senator from Oklahoma, was instrumental in arranging funding for a delegation of humor scholars to come from Russia to attend our 1987 conference.

There were many humorous – or maybe not-so-humorous – events connected to this endeavor. About a month before the conference, FBI agents even came to our house to interview us about our intentions and to inform us that the editor of the Russian humor magazine, *Krokodil*, could not attend because our university was within twenty miles of Williams Field, which at that time was a major military airport. They explained that Russia also had a twenty-mile limit on keeping America's high government officials away from military airports. Of course, we were sad to have to report this to our Russian visitors, but the

editor happily turned over his designated spot to his son, so at least *Krokodil* was represented.

The excitement connected to our having a Russian delegation spread throughout the world of “humor scholars,” so that several other humor scholars from various countries paid their own way and came to our conference. ASU faculty and staff members hosted these international visitors in their homes so that they would not have to pay hotel bills in addition to their airfare. We still meet people on campus – ranging from Department secretaries to high-level administrators – who remind us of how they helped us out at our grand conference finale.

One of the attendees was Stefan Furtounov, the Director of the “House of Humour and Satire” in Gabrovo, Bulgaria. We were alarmed on the second day of the conference when we couldn’t find him, but then we learned that he had snuck off just for one day so he could see Disneyland in California. He was back in plenty of time for the last day of the conference. A couple of years after we had retired from our annual WHIM conferences, we traveled to Bulgaria so that we could see Furtounov’s truly outstanding Museum of Humor. We still remember being surprised to see a crocheted cannon with a drooping gun barrel and an artistic sculpture of our Statue of Liberty sinking into the ocean. The delightful interpreter who had been assigned to us walked hurriedly past this display without saying anything about it, so we tried not to be too obvious in the way we stared.

After hosting six WHIMSY conferences, we put out the word that we had used up every favor that anyone at our University owed us and so we asked for a volunteer to take over the 1988 conference. Victor Raskin and Shaun Hughes from Purdue University offered to host the 1988 conference, where plans would be drawn up for the future of the organization. As usual, it was scheduled for the April Fools’ Day weekend, but at the business meeting the first item on the agenda was to make a new rule stating that whatever university hosted the conference could choose the date that would make the most sense for the host university, as well as for potential attendees. It was a unanimous decision because in 1988, April Fools’ Day in Indiana had been cold, windy, and snowy. Besides it conflicted with Passover celebrations for the many Jewish comedians and scholars who were active in ISHS.

Happily, the volunteer hosts for the 1989 conference turned out to be Margaret Baker and Jesse Crisler from Brigham Young University in Hawaii. At this conference in Hawaii, real business was conducted and plans were made for the publication of a refereed journal to replace the *Whimsy* conference proceedings. It would be named *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research*, and would be published on a quarterly basis. Victor Raskin, who with Shaun Hughes had co-chaired the 1988 Humor Conference at Purdue University, happily distributed their book of “concretes,” which they had entitled *At Last, The Last WHIMSY VII*.

Victor Raskin deserves a huge thank-you for being the founding editor of the new journal. He was followed by Giseline Kuipers, Salvatore Attardo, and Thomas Ford. This highly respected *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research* is now in its thirty-first year of publication. The success of the journal and the rotation of the annual conferences between inside and outside of North America fully established humor as a respected field of study and research.

Between 1989 and 2011, we attended all of the International Society of Humor Conferences except for the ones in Spain and in Hong Kong. The conference chairs were as follows:

- 1989: Margaret Baker and Jesse Crisler of BYU–Hawaii
- 1990: Mark Glazer of the University of Sheffield, UK
- 1991: Ann-Marie Guilmette of Brock University, Canada
- 1992: Judith Stora-Sandor and Nelly Feuerhahn of the Sorbonne, France
- 1993: Larry Sherman of Miami University (the conference was in Luxembourg)
- 1994: Mary Ann Rishel of Ithaca College, New York
- 1995: George Paton of Aston University, UK
- 1996: Jessica Milner Davis and John McCallum of the University of New South Wales, Australia
- 1997: Amy Carrell of the University of Central Oklahoma
- 1998: Sven Svebak of Norwegian University of Science and Technology
- 1999: Martin Lampert of Holy Names College, Oakland, California
- 2000: Hiroshi Inoue of Kansai University, and Goh Abe of Tokushima Bunri University, Japan
- 2001: Larry Mintz of the University of Maryland, College Park
- 2002: Delia Chiaro of the University of Bologna, Italy
- 2003: Judith Kaplan-Weinger and Richard Hallett of Northeastern Illinois University
- 2004: Lorene Birden of the University of Bourgogne, France
- 2005: Salvatore Attardo of Youngstown State University, Ohio
- 2006: Martin Führl of Danish University of Education, Copenhagen, Denmark
- 2007: Margaret Mathias of Salve Regina University, Rhode Island
- 2008: Juan Garcia Cerrada, Carmen Valero-Carces and Begona Carbelo Baquero of the University of Alcalá, Spain
- 2009: Amy Bippus of California State University, Long Beach, California
- 2010: Xiaodong Yue of City University of Hong Kong
- 2011: Patrice Oppliger of Boston University, Massachusetts.

Although we felt too old to travel to the subsequent ISHS conferences between 2012 and 2018, we are nevertheless indebted to these conference chairs and have appreciated interacting with them and reading many of their papers in the *Humor* journal. These recent conference chairs include:

2012: Wladyslaw Chlopicki of Jagiellonian University, Poland  
 2013: Larry Ventis of the College of William and Mary, Virginia  
 2014: Sibe Doosje of the University of Utrecht, Netherlands  
 2015: Martin Lampert of Holy Names University, California  
 2016: Eric Weitz of Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland  
 2017: Jean-Marie Lafortune of the University of Quebec in Montreal, Canada  
 2018: Liisi Laineste of Estonian Literary Museum in Tallinn, Estonia.

In addition to these conference chairs, members of the International Society for Humor Studies who have had a profound effect on our humor insights include Larry Barron, Samy Basu, Ursula Beerman, Janet Bing, Hugo Carretero Dios, Wallace Chafe, Christie Davies, Peter Derks, Jeffrey Goldstein, Paul and Robin Grawe, Gil Greengross, Christian Hempelmann, Helga Kotthoff, Nick Kuiper, Paul Lewis, Robert Mankoff, Moira Marsh, Rod Martin, John Morreall, Neal Norrick, Elliott Oring, John Parkin, Diana Popa, Rene Proyer, Graeme Ritchie, Willibald Ruch, Elaine Safer, Andrea Samson, Limor Shifman, Moira Smith, Julia Taylor, and Villy Tsakona. Please forgive us if we have accidentally left out other names.

We have also appreciated working with The Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor (AATH). Members who have been especially helpful in sharing information and ideas with us include Maia Aziz, Don Baird, Karyn Buxman, Kay Caskey, Lenny Dave, Ed Dunkelblau, Brenda Elsagher, Barbara Grapstein, Guy Giard, Heidi Hanna, Sporty King, Allen Klein, Jill Knox, Chip Lutz, Paul Moore, Mary Kay Morrison, Melissa Mork, Nila Nielsen, Jae Pierce-Baba, Katherine Puckett, Steven Sultanoff, Shirley Trout, Steve Wilson, and Laurie Young.

We also want to thank the American Name Society, whose members have interacted with us on various aspects of humorous onomastics. People who come immediately to mind include Ernest Abel, Herbert Barry, Bruce Brown, Catherine Davies, Christine De Vinne, Cleveland Evans, Ed Lawson, Carol Lombard, Michael McGoff, Michel Nguessan, Frank Nuessel, Andre LaPierre, Willy Van Langendonck, Lynn Westney, Kemp Williams, and Sandra Wright.

We also want to express our appreciation to our friends at Arizona State University who, after we had officially retired in 2011, made it possible for us to teach three courses entitled “Humor across the Disciplines” in the ASU English Department, and two similar courses in the ASU Honors College. The names of ASU linguists that come immediately to mind include Karen Adams, Jean Arnold, Dawn Bates, Betsy Brandt, Lee Croft, Aryeh Faltz, Sandra Griffiths-Nagy, Mark James, Robert LaBarge, Neal Lester, Ruby Macksoud, Roy Major, Alberto Rios, Maureen Schmid, Lupco Spasovski, Suzanne Steadman, Gene and Kristin Valentine, Elly Van Gelderen, and Timothy Wong.

We would also like to thank NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English), and ALAN (Adolescent Literature Assembly at NCTE) for their support in providing us with information about humorous young adult novels and the effect they have on students in both elementary and high schools. Our special thanks go to Lisa Arter, Joan Bauer, Jean Boreen, April Brannon, Patty Campbell, Orson Scott Card, Pam Cole, Beverly Chin, Darren Crovitz, Chris Crowe, Anjanette Darrington, Jessica Early, Don Gallo, Jack Gantos, David Gill, Bryan Gillis, Wendy Glenn, Corrine Gordon, Jeffrey Kaplan, Joan Kaywell, Teri Lesesne, Aaron Levy, Katie Mason, David Pegram, Christina Saidy, Tim San Pedro, Carol Smith, Diane Tuccillo, Arturo Valdespino, Elle Wolterbeek, Mary Wong, Connie Zitlow, and especially Jim Blasingame. In the *English Journal's* "Honor List of the Best Books" for young readers, many of the books (both fiction and non-fiction) are filled with elements of humor, irony, satire, parody, paradox, innuendo, and language play. We also need to express our appreciation to the ASU Emeritus College, and ASURA for their support of our humor investigations, especially Per Aannestad, Jay Braun, Elmer Gooding, Dick Jacob, Jo Madonna, Larry Mankin, Barry McNeill, Jeri Meeks, Tara Fuchs Roessler, David Schwalm, Mary Stevens, Linda Van Scoy, and Bill Verdini.

Since our retirement from ASU's English Department in 2011, we have been giving presentations related to humor across the disciplines at various retirement communities throughout the state of Arizona. We thank the Arizona Humanities Council for arranging our presentations in Arizona cities that range from the old frontier mining town of Bisbee to some of the newest senior citizen communities in places like Scottsdale and Sun City. We also want to thank various senior educational groups including *New Adventures* (Jan Bobbett, Eileen Holmes, Ed Schauble, and Wayne Wright), *New Frontiers* (Ann Bloxam, Con Downey, Bob Dukelow, Gary Kleeman, Shiela and Archie Millhollon, Jennifer Wong), *Sagewood* (Warner and Ruth Davidson and Norman and Rose Levine), *Osher* (Karla Burkhart, Brandy Daley, and Richard Knopf), and *Stonegate* (Jane Picoult), for allowing us to make and share PowerPoint presentations about various aspects of humor studies as we interact with senior citizens about the powers and limitations of humor.

# 1 Introduction and Overview

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The field of Humor Studies is different from other academic areas in that it is typically a secondary consideration. Humor scholars in various universities are most often assigned to an academic area such as Anthropology, Art, Business, Education, Health, History, Law, Linguistics, Literature, Medicine, Music, Philosophy, Politics, Psychology, Religion, Sociology, or STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math). And then within their particular field they specialize in humor studies. However, conventions and publications of the International Society for Humor Studies, the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor, and other humor organizations tend to be eclectic and cross-disciplinary. For example, we often attend humor discussions and read articles that are outside of our own particular discipline, so we are constantly learning (and teaching) about disciplines other than our own.

Many humor scholars are attempting to develop a “Universal Theory” of humor analysis that can be applied to all disciplines, but we’ve noticed that each of these “Universal Theories” tends to favor the particular discipline of the person who is making the proposal. We call our own theory, “Features, Functions, and Subjects of Humor”; we fully realize that it is not a leak-proof umbrella hanging over all of the other theories about humor, but at least it provides a beginning.

## **How Can We Determine a Person’s “Sense of Humor”?**

In the humor classes we teach, and in the books and articles that we write, we often receive the following softened criticism: “This information is insightful and significant, and I can apply it to my life, but it isn’t really humorous.” After receiving this same criticism over and over and over again, we began to figure out that there are two reasons that people have this perception. The first reason is that we’ve devoted our lives to humor, and therefore, we find everything humorous. In our lives, everything is humorous. For ourselves, we have a very broad definition of “sense of humor.” But we have gradually come to realize that most other people don’t have this same broad “sense of humor.” Instead, they have a narrower “sense of ambiguity and wordplay,” or a “sense



of sarcasm,” or a “sense of parody, or paradox.” When they are investigating humor, some people look for and find the superiority or hostility aspects of humor, or the incongruity and incongruity resolution aspects of humor, or the release and relief aspects of humor.

If you’re a linguist or a literature scholar, you might analyze a joke as a miniature discourse in which the set-up is loaded in the direction of the mundane, and the punchline is loaded in the direction of the dramatic, which allows the listener to reinterpret the set-up as dramatic. The joke is seen as a miniature discourse with a script, like the script of a play or a screenplay, and the punchline is seen as the denouement or epiphany that reveals the real meaning of the joke. This requires what we see as a “sense of epiphany.” People with a “sense of epiphany” tend not to see weird things as “ridiculous” or “ludicrous” (laughable), but rather as “insightful.”

Some humorists and humor scholars stress the **features** of humor, like ambiguity, exaggeration, understatement, hostility, incongruity, irony, or surprise of humor. They might ask if surprise, for example, is a necessary or sufficient condition for humor. Surprise might be a necessary condition, but it is not a sufficient condition. If a person were to open Jeffrey Daumer’s refrigerator and find human appendages, that would be a surprise, but it would not be humorous.

Other humorists and humor scholars stress the **functions** of humor, like to amuse, to tease, to test limits, to establish superiority or gain control. Sociologists might consider how humor is used to bond people in a social group, or to ostracize or intimidate people who are not in that group. Educators might stress how humor can be used to teach concepts, or help students remember these concepts, or make students feel less stressed in a classroom environment. Psychologists might consider how humor is used to cope with difficulties, save face, establish superiority, or tease or insult someone. Literature teachers might contrast the nature of humor that is used in Shakespeare’s comedies and romances (mainly wordplay and puns), and that used in his tragedies (for comic relief). Rhetoric and Composition teachers might investigate the difference between an error (unintentional deviation from the norm) and a rhetorical device (intentional deviation from the norm). Linguists might use humor to investigate the nature of intentional and unintentional ambiguity. Business types might investigate how humor can be used to befriend the customer and sell products. And politicians might investigate how humor requires people to see issues from more than a single perspective, and might therefore be used to create a less polarized political environment. Historians might study what the humor of a particular historical period reveals about people’s attitudes and beliefs. These historians study the *zeitgeists* (spirit of the times) of different decades, like the roaring twenties, or centuries, like the Renaissance. And humor offers significant insights into these *zeitgeists*.



Finally, humorists and humor scholars investigate the **subjects** of humor. This is especially important for historians and sociologists, because humor tends to be edgy, and therefore the subjects often tend to be the taboo aspects of society. These taboo aspects are the subjects that we are not supposed to discuss, but they are the most significant subjects in our lives – ethnicity, gender, political leanings, religious beliefs, sexuality, etc. Because these are taboo areas in our culture, much of our censorship relates to these subjects, but because the subjects are so important to us we must think about them, but we're not supposed to joke about them. But of course we do. The jokes that are told in comedy clubs make conservatives feel uncomfortable, because the jokes contain obscenities, vulgarities, profanities, swear words, or four-letter words. These conservatives are also bothered by jokes about sex, or body parts, or religion. So for a long time, we have had censorship from the right. But in recent times we are living in an age of “political correctness,” so we are being censored from the liberal and progressive left as well, so now we are not supposed to tell ethnic jokes, or gender jokes, or old-people jokes. Indeed, we are not supposed to tell jokes that target any marginalized group or individual. However, we feel that there is no subject, conservative or progressive, that should be off-limits, as long as we have genuine empathy for the targeted group, and as long as our wording communicates this empathy.

## Chapter Overviews

### 2 Anthropology and Ethnic Studies

In Chapter 2, our main focus is on humor created by and about Native Americans, who are also referred to with such terms as “First Nation” people and as “American Indians.” They are the people who were on the American continent many years before the 1492 arrival of Columbus, who mistakenly called them “Indians,” because he thought he had arrived in the West Indies. However, we need to explain that there are many different tribes of American Indians, and we are focusing on the Navajo Indians, who live mostly in parts of Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico. One of the reasons we chose to focus on them is that we have both been acquainted with Navajo Indians since we were children, and they are one of the largest tribes in the United States. They are famous for their Navajo rugs, which are hand-woven from the wool of the sheep that they still raise. They played an important part in World War II, when they helped the United States marines during the last years of the war. They worked hard to devise and memorize a code using mostly their own language. It was the only code that was never broken during the war, and was kept secret until the mid-1960s. Most of the men who were official Navajo code-talkers have by now passed away.

### 3 Irony, Parody, and Satire in Art

Arthur Koestler's descriptions of artistic originality, scientific discovery, and comic inspiration are explored in this chapter, along with expressionism, minimalism, and the Dada movement. Other items include humorous architecture and a history of artists who have incorporated humor, irony, parody, and/or satire into their work. What goes into the creation of different kinds of caricatures and cartoons is also treated, as is the challenge that viewers have in figuring out the expressionism of Vincent Van Gogh's works and of Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. When artists rely on minimalism, they leave viewers with a big responsibility to figure out what is being communicated. Surrealism is a technique that artists use to present viewers with puzzles to figure out. Comic artists are also eager to jump into politics, which is how English got such terms as *Teddy Bear* from the name of Theodore Roosevelt, *Simple J. Malarkey* as a play on Senator Joe McCarthy's name, and the title of Art Spiegelman's graphic novel about 9/11, *In the Shadow of No Towers*.

### 4 Business

Two kinds of humor will be explored in this chapter. First is the use of humor inside businesses, i.e. the kinds of things that companies do to help their employees stay happy and productive. These activities can range from having bulletin boards reserved for cartoons, company newsletters that share positive information about employees, "break-rooms" supplied with humorous reading or viewing materials, and having leaders who genuinely get acquainted with their employees and figure out ways to relate to them, including acknowledging people's "special" days or accomplishments. The second kind of humor is what businesses do to develop positive feelings between themselves and their customers. This can range from cheerful and humorous advertisements to the marketing of humor-related products, and the training of employees to be at least "pleasant," even if not out-and-out humorous, to customers. Some companies encourage their employees to wear costumes for Halloween and/or little reminders of other holidays.

### 5 Computer Science

Of course, everyone is aware of how computers and other new technologies are revolutionizing the creation and distribution of humor and the way that witticisms, as well as art and photographs, can be sent simultaneously to millions of people. But even more significant is the way that computers can change the attitudes and thinking processes both of small groups of people and sometimes of the whole world. Computers also allow the distribution of new kinds of information and new kinds of humor. In his *The Act of Creation*, Arthur Koestler says that there are three types of creativity, and that they all

relate to incongruity and incongruity resolution. The first type he calls “Artistic Originality,” the second type “Scientific Discovery,” and the third type, “Comic Inspiration.”

As new concepts emerge, we recycle old words and phrases, often from fantasy and science fiction, as with the term *Godzillagram* for a huge packet, *Munchkin* for a teenage techie, *Trojan Horse* for a program that infiltrates a computer, and *Tree Killers* from J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*. Only through the quick and widespread communication enabled by computers could such terms make their way around the world.

## 6 Education and Children’s Literature

In Education and in studies of child development, computers have made tremendous differences, especially in what and how new kinds of information are taught to students from pre-schools to sophisticated graduate programs. One of the biggest differences in recent years is that teachers and administrators realize that there is so much information in the world that we can no longer teach every child the exact same thing. In modern schools, many children in the same class are working with different concepts and ideas. In the first humor class that we taught to students in our university’s Honor Program, we were surprised to see how much they knew about finding online humor, and then we were even more surprised to see that individually they were using quite different approaches and sources. One of the things that surprised many of our college-age students was that the online use of a smiley face, made with a colon followed by a hyphen and a parenthesis, was invented way back in 1982 – several years before our students were born. We weren’t even able to illustrate this “old-fashioned” kind of “smiley face,” because our computer automatically changes the three symbols into what we now see as a smiley face ☺.

## 7 Gender Studies

This is a chapter that we went back to and rewrote after the rest of this book was prepared, because of the many ways that gender issues entered the political scene near the end of 2017 and on into 2018. Sexual harassment – some of it under the guise of humor – became a huge political issue. Because it is such a sensitive subject, many writers and cartoonists have preferred to use humorous cartoons and quips to bring up the subject. Also in real life, both males and females “carefully” tell sex-related jokes or bring up current news as a way of “testing” the attitudes of their acquaintances.

## 8 Geography

While different countries have their own kinds of humor and use their own languages to communicate, there is also physical humor that transcends language

barriers, as in the silent movies that starred such actors as Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. Place names are an efficient way to communicate the contents and the “mood” of particular books or dramas as with Isak Dinesen’s *Out of Africa*, John Steinbeck’s *East of Eden*, Ian Fleming’s *From Russia with Love*, and Richard Rodger’s *South Pacific*. Many of the cartoons and the memes and jokes that are online come from what we used to call “foreign countries.” With our ever-growing interest in travel and tourism, the general public is communicating more with people from other countries. Sometimes, we see humorous pictures of unusual geographical scenes such as an amazing trail going up a formidable mountain or an old, abandoned car with a tree growing out of its front window. Movie-makers look for intriguing place names such as in Neil Simon’s play *Biloxi Blues*, and in the Coen brothers’ film *Fargo*. Car-makers have discovered that they can borrow the excitement of travel by choosing romantic-sounding place names for their cars. A Chevrolet sedan is named the *Monte Carlo*, Kia has a sedan named *Sorento* (after Sorrento, Italy), while Subaru’s *Outback* takes its name from Australia’s frontier.

## 9 Gerontology

Because of better healthcare, growing old isn’t what it used to be. For example, in the United States, people aged over 60 now outnumber those under the age of 15, which means that humor about old age is undergoing considerable changes. At one of our Humor Conferences, comedy writer Max Shulman told us that if he told a joke that came too close to home for his readers, they would not enjoy it because they would think, “Oh no! That’s me!” However, in our classes with senior citizens we have found the opposite to be true. When someone in the class tells a funny story about something that has happened to them, the other seniors in the class who have had a similar experience are the ones who laugh the loudest. They are happy to see that they are not alone in the kinds of new experiences and feelings that they are experiencing. An especially well-liked meme in one of our classes was about an old man confiding that his childhood punishments have now become his old-age treats, i.e. going to bed early, not leaving his house, and missing a party.

## 10 History

The German word *Zeitgeist* translates into “Spirit of the times,” which is an appropriate phrase to use when we describe the many fairly recent developments in humor about minorities and the kinds of humor that became popular through television sitcoms, professional comedians, and the increasing responsibilities that come to people who are left with the responsibility of interpreting the memes or the cartoons that their friends forward to them. Historian Joseph Boskin, who directed the Urban Studies and Public Policy Program at Boston

University, has collected the kinds of jokes that people share when they are carpooling, working out at the gym, riding the subway, or just getting through a rough week at work. He uses these jokes as an example of “survival humor,” because they relieve the tension that is part of everyday life that includes getting acquainted not only with different people but also with new customs and technologies including microwave ovens, hidden cameras, secret recordings of telephone conversations, and all of the mysteries of modern medicine as compared to the “good old days,” when people thought they were managing well if they went once a year to visit the town doctor.

## 11 Journalism

“Home Town” newspapers used to present mostly local news and opinions, while today the news is truly international, and in many ways the existence of social media is taking the place of what in our grandparents’ generation would have been in the local newspaper. But today there are far fewer local newspapers and many of those that still exist have partnered with national services, such as that provided by *USA Today*, a shortened version of which is now tucked inside our local paper, the *Arizona Republic*. Most television stations also have partnerships so as to provide local, national, and international programming and news. And in trying harder to compete with national news sources, many local papers now give more space and attention to contributions from readers. In the *Arizona Republic*, the letters-to-the-editor used to be tucked away in small print, but such letters now have a whole page of their own with boldface headings on each letter. And in the middle of the page is a large color reproduction of a syndicated cartoon, usually related to politics or other current news. The cartoon is usually one by the *Arizona Republic*’s own Steve Benson, but about once a week, there will be a cartoon from some other paper’s syndicated cartoonist. Because of President Donald Trump’s campaign against what he calls “Fake News!” people are now more skeptical of what they read and hear on radio and television. However, comic strips are still being published. They rely on both the kind of humor that grows out of daily life and out of national and world politics, but they are no longer the draw that they were when we were children. In Alleen’s family, there were six children and, at any one time, more than half of these six children were at the age to watch for the delivery of the paper so they could be first to grab “the funnies.”

## 12 Law

Lawyers and judges are increasingly involved with humor, especially in relation to disagreements about the creation and protection of trademarks and about accusations of copyright infringement, plus, there is a whole genre of anti-lawyer jokes. These are popular because many people resent paying money

to lawyers when they are already in some kind of trouble. Their frustration is increased by the necessity of having to hire a lawyer to present their side of the story. In most court cases, one side wins and the other side loses; however legal matters are increasingly complicated so that in such disagreements both sides often feel they have lost. Another kind of online humor related to law is the reprinting of laws that are basically humorous – maybe because they are so out of date that they are funny, or maybe because they relate to local customs or practices that are unknown to readers outside of their area. Also, the general public enjoys reading reprints of the recordings made by court stenographers whose job it is to keep an accurate record of all the questions that are asked and all the answers that are given in court cases. These are often filled with unintentional humor. Also, the public's interest in matters of the law are an increasingly popular subject for television where several “judges” conduct minor cases in front of TV cameras. Judge Judy is one of the first, and still the most popular, of these judges.

### 13 Linguistics

Linguists specialize in the study of language, and so of course they are interested in verbal humor, whether it is intentional or accidental. They use what is sometimes called “script model grammar” to focus on small discourses where they make distinctions between intentional ambiguity – sometimes called “double-entendre” – and accidental humor. Many common jokes are loaded toward the mundane, but then the “punchline” suddenly makes the reader or listener reconsider and come up with a dramatic interpretation, which comes as a joke. For adults and teenagers, this sudden insight is often related to a “naughty” or sexual interpretation. And of course, there are many other ways that linguists work with humor, partly because part of their training deals with learning about other languages and other cultures. This additional knowledge often lets them recognize the differences between accidental and purposely created humor, and also gives them more insight than most people have into the many meanings of sentences.

### 14 Literature

It is hard to define literary humor, because there are as many different approaches to literature as there are people creating, as well as reading and interpreting literature. One good example is the literary metaphor, as written about by Northrop Frye when he interprets the four seasons of the year as symbols for our lives. He relates spring to romance, summer to comedy, fall to irony, and winter to old age and death. Of course this literary comparison to seasons of the year works only for certain parts of the world, but it is nevertheless a good illustration of how scholars work to help readers and writers

understand how literary allusions are based on the experiences of readers. Comedies are more likely to have happy endings and to deal with the earlier parts of people's lives, while tragedies have sad endings and often deal with the later parts of life and the disillusionment that many people feel as they see that their lives are not turning out as they imagined. Gothic humor is associated with the dark side of life, i.e. haunted houses, deep forests, or mysterious caves, etc. The classic distinction between comedies and tragedies is that comedies have happy endings, while tragedies have sad endings. Gothic humor is usually associated with the dark side of life, i.e. haunted houses, deep forests, and mysterious caves. People create ironic humor when they feel all is lost. Juvenalian satire is dark and bitter, while Horatian satire is mild and amusing.

### **15 Medicine and Health**

Obviously it is good for people who are having health problems to be cheered up by friends and family as part of their treatment. Because of this, humor is finding its way into hospitals and other treatment centers, and into organizations and care centers for the elderly. In many ways, such humor is as good for the caregivers as it is for the patients. Nevertheless, we feel a need to warn that humor is just one part of life and that responsible humor scholars need to be careful not to raise false hopes for family members and patients.

### **16 Music**

Probably all of us have fond memories that are in some way connected to music. Lucky children – at least in America – remember the “Happy Birthday” song or being at a parade and enjoying the music of a marching band, or maybe they have enjoyed singing with other children as they rode a bus or walked together for some important event. Two-thirds of the Broadway shows that have had over 1,200 performances have been musicals. Also, many of the best comedians were first trained as musicians and continue using the skills they learned in their public performances. And even in serious and sad operas, composers often rely on music to provide comic relief.

### **17 Names**

Names play a huge part in our lives, not only the name each of us is given at birth to go along with our inherited family name, but also both common and proper names of products, places, and things. Now with television, it's amazing how quickly very young children can identify brand names of their favorite foods and of the toys they want relatives to buy for them. Deep in the minds of adults are also the names of the places they lived and the schools they attended and of their teachers and even of some of their most memorable classmates. This chapter shows how names can go through processes of generalization



and/or specialization and how the same name can have positive connotations for one person and negative connotations for someone else.

### **18 Performing Arts: Theatre, Dance, and Music**

Throughout their lives, ordinary people have most of their experience with performing arts through television and movies, but still their love for such experiences probably traces back to memories of feeling butterflies in their own stomach when they were in a school play or stood in front of a crowd to recite a poem they had learned. Their memories will be all the sweeter if their early experience was a success and if people responded positively to it.

### **19 Philosophy**

Serious humor scholars subscribe to varying philosophies about humor. To some it is an inexplicable mystery, to others it can be explained as a Theory of Relief – something that helps people with life’s challenges. Still others believe in the Superiority Theory of Humor, which says that we laugh at events and people and even animals because it makes us feel superior, or at least “in charge.” A similar kind of feeling is explained in the Incongruity Resolution Theory, which says that humor helps people ponder on similarities and differences.

### **20 Physical Education and Sports Mascots**

If we are in a good mood, we might smile or even laugh as we watch a toddler try to stand up or climb onto his mother’s lap. However, there are many other things about our physical bodies that serve as the basis for humor. Clowns in circuses and cheerleaders and mascots at athletic events do things with their bodies that can be seen from long distances and still make an audience smile or respond in some other positive way. We also go to the zoo to smile at how various animals use their bodies and we cheer – and sometimes laugh – at what happens in playgrounds as small as school yards, and as big as stadiums that seat thousands of spectators.

### **21 Politics**

Because of modern media, especially television, we are now seeing the same kinds of humor that children use when they call each other names and think up clever ways to insult their playmates. We hope that by the time this book is published, the mass media and the politicians who play leadership roles through insulting each other will have regained some of the old-fashioned kinds of politeness that used to characterize political conflicts. We think that humor helps people see both sides of an issue and therefore can help us be less polarized.



## 22 Psychology

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), who is known as the father of psychoanalysis, came up with the idea that telling and responding to jokes is sort of like dreaming. They are both ways to let repressed feelings enter the conscious mind. By letting these repressed feelings out, we save some of the energy that is needed to repress them and that energy is then turned to laughter. A modern scholar, John Morreall, who specializes in humor and is a Professor of Religious Studies at the College of William and Mary, takes this idea further to talk about the psychological differences associated with having a “Comic Vision” of life vs. having a “Tragic Vision” of life.

## 23 Religion

Because religion is associated in some way with the service and the worship of God or the Supernatural, it is naturally filled with mystery and ambiguity. With any subject when this is the case, people strain to make sense of the “big” ideas. Joseph Campbell is a philosopher who offers the explanation that in Western culture what is viewed as religion and what is viewed as mythology is that with myths people feel free to create and enjoy humor, while with religion most people have ambivalent feelings and aren’t quite sure what territory is permissible for joking. This chapter explores this quandary.

## 24 Rhetoric and Composition

Nearly eighty American universities offer doctoral level work in rhetoric, which is a subject where students study language-related symbols and how they communicate particular values. They study what Aristotle treated as Ethos, Pathos, and Logos. It is what Walker Gibson calls the “Tough, Sweet, and Stuffy” rhetorical styles. This chapter treats writing related to obituary and funeral humor, which is mostly found in the obituaries of celebrities. It also treats other kinds of humor that are more or less related to religion and maybe to death. Some of these allusions are called *mondegreens*, while other humor relates to clever advertising schemes.

## 25 Sociology

Clowns of different kinds play a big role in the social life of Americans, and so does clown-like humor coming from “regular” people. Celebrity roasts are one place where “ordinary” people enjoy laughing at celebrities. They also enjoy rejoinder humor used between people of approximately equal status, as with exchanges between Winston Churchill and George Bernard Shaw. One of the reasons that the Marx Brothers became so famous is the way they teased each other. And one of the reasons for the popularity of clowns is that they come in such varieties. For example, the medieval court jesters worked for royalty and made themselves useful in the courts of kings by distracting audiences and

turning spectators to the side of the king. In some ways these early jesters filled a similar role to what the musicians do on the stage for such late-night television comedians as Stephen Colbert, Jimmy Fallon, and Seth Meyers.

The most surprising thing about clowns is how in the summer and fall of 2016, “Scary Clowns” began appearing in many different countries. Their actions were absolutely opposite to what we usually think of as clown-like behavior. Chain stores quit selling clown masks, many parents did not let their children go trick or treating, and the McDonald restaurants temporarily stopped sponsoring appearances of their Ronald McDonald clown. People were relieved that scary clowns did not return in time for Halloween in 2017, but still it will be a long time before clowns get back their former positive reputation.

### Points of Departure

1. Do you remember – or can someone in your family remember – one of the first things that made you laugh or smile. If so, what was it – a creative toy, a funny adult, a memorable Halloween costume, or something else? Explain.
2. Can you remember a picture book that you particularly enjoyed? Alleen remembers the story of *Ferdinand* by Monro Leaf, illustrated by Robert Lawson (Viking, 1936). One reason that she liked it is that her father raised cattle, so she had fun relating to the bulls in the story and the ridiculous expressions that Robert Lawson put on their faces. If you have a strong memory like that of a picture book, see if you can find a copy and then figure out why you liked it.
3. Or, maybe you remember a favorite cartoon. If so, describe it to the class to see if other members of the class might like it as much as you did. What was it that made it stick in your mind so long? *The Flintstones* is one of the first television animated sitcoms that we remember watching with our children when they were very young. However, we probably had different reasons than they did for thinking it was funny.
4. Do you remember any little games or songs that involved body language, as with the song, “An Eensie Weensie Spider...”? We know that this little song stuck in the mind of one of our family members who was dying from cancer. When we helped her get out of bed and walk slowly and carefully to the nearby bathroom, she smiled and repeated the words to this old children’s song, apparently because it reminded her of the “eensie weensie” steps she was taking. If possible, share with the class other personal stories where humor is used to cope with embarrassment or “tragedy.”

## 2 Anthropology and Ethnic Studies

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A dictionary definition of “anthropology” is “the science of human beings, especially the study of humans in relation to where they live, the origin of their ancestors, and the distribution, origin, classification, and relationship of races, physical character, and environmental and social relations, and culture.” The humor used by and about particular groups is only one small part of what defines a particular group, and we should clarify that as groups mix with each other, the humor belonging to or created by one group might be mixed in with the jokes of another group, which is why listeners often hear several different versions of particular jokes. How such groups devise humor and use it with each other is an important clue to the values of different groups.

Some people suggest that ethnic joking should be forbidden, but such an idea is not very realistic. Advocates of the idea fail to realize how prevalent such joking is and that it can serve positive as well as negative purposes. Skilled speakers often use ethnic humor to challenge an audience’s assumptions and to surprise listeners by making them bump up against some of their own prejudices. Another idea that is hard to prove, but is espoused by many critics and teachers of humor, is that audiences are more receptive to lessons that come with a smile than with a scolding. But still, people’s overall ideas about various groups change, as illustrated by an experience that comedian Bill Dana had. He used a Mexican accent to tell some truly funny jokes about a character named José Jimenez. Many people, including Hispanics, thought he was promoting racism and so he slipped over to a different kind of joke. In a similar way, Taco Bell restaurants no longer have a spokesman who speaks with a Spanish accent.

Folklorist Elliott Oring says that for listeners to appreciate an ethnic joke they must know enough about the group to catch on quickly and easily, but at the same time they have to have a “measure of emotional distance” from the subject matter of the humor. Joke collector Larry Wilde claims that ethnic settings fill a literary need by foreshadowing the surprise, but without giving it away. A good example is the way that Garrison Keillor tells about Minnesota Lutherans, as when he explains that in Lake Wobegon when people come down with the “Swedish flu, it is the usual flu with chills, fever, diarrhea, vomiting,

achiness, and personal guilt,” but it is accompanied by an overpowering urge to put things in order. For example, “before you collapse into bed, you iron the sheets and before you vomit, you plan the family’s menu for the weekend.”

Such humor scholars as Mahadev L. Apte, the author of *Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach* (1985) and Christie Davies, the author of *Ethnic Humor around the World: A Comparative Analysis* (1990), have brought attention to differences in humor styles and subjects. For example, one of Christie Davies’ observations relates to jokes told throughout Eastern Europe by people living in countries that during the 1940s had been taken into the Soviet Union. Many people were hesitant to make jokes about top party leaders. Instead, they took out their frustrations by joking about anonymous, mid-level authorities such as soldiers and police officers. In his 1998 *Jokes and Their Relation to Society*, Davies gave this example:

*Question:* Why do Russian officers have three stripes on the sleeves of their uniforms?

*Answer:* So they can tell where to bend their elbows.

A related example was:

*Question:* Why do their soldiers always go around in threes?

*Answer:* Because one can read and one can write, and the other one has to keep track of the intellectuals.

These jokes now sound old-fashioned and out-of-date because ethnic humor changes with changing time. This happens in groups that are as large as whole countries or regions, and sometimes as small as a single neighborhood that is inside of a big city. Or it might be even smaller, as when the members of a college fraternity on a college campus develop their own set of jokes making fun of competing fraternities or competing universities.

In relation to ethnic humor, University of Maryland professor of American Studies, Larry Mintz, has described four developmental stages. He says that in the first stage, the humorists tend to be critical of the “outgroup.” During the second stage they are critical of their own group in a kind of self-deprecation. In the third stage, the ethnic humorists become “realistic” in seeing laughable aspects of both their own group and the outgroup, while in the fourth stage the oppressed minority gains revenge by making fun of the majority. He added that the most amusing jokes are usually found in the middle ranges because this is where the hostility does not overpower the humor.

### **African-American Humor**

American humor scholars have always acknowledged the contributions and effects of Jewish humor, as well as the humor of performers who came from

European countries. However, it is only within living memory that scholars have begun to acknowledge the contributions of African-Americans to the overall development of humor in the United States – and around the world. This is because from the very beginning, people from Africa did not come to America on their own, but instead came as captured prisoners brought to be sold to plantation owners in the Southern States, where the land and the moisture was just right for growing cotton, as well as the necessary food supplies to support the families who owned the farms and to a lesser extent the slaves and their families. An especially cruel part of the slave business was that when the captured slaves were loaded on ships to be taken to America, the traders were especially careful to separate the speakers of the same language so that as they travelled they could not talk to each other and conspire to escape, etc.

The American Civil War took place between 1861 and 1865, with the major issue being whether the Southern States could continue the practice of slavery. The South lost the War and had to make tremendous adjustments, as did all the people who had been slaves and now had to find homes and work to do. Many of them stayed doing the jobs they had always done, only now they were paid salaries. A limited number of former slaves engaged in entertainment, including minstrel shows, but at least for a while these had to be under the auspices of white business people. Two of the earliest African-Americans to succeed in show business were Moms Mabley, who lived from 1887 to 1975, and Pigmeat Markham, who lived from 1904 to 1981.

As the years went by and the African-Americans settled in as citizens rather than as slaves, Americans all over the country began to look to them for entertainment. Until well into World War II, there were travelling minstrel shows – many with white people performing the kinds of dances and songs that they had seen performed by African-American slaves. Indeed, some slaves were enlisted to work with white performers (who were made up to look like black people) to put on these traveling shows, which were one of the few productions or special events that traveled into small, rural towns in the United States. The most common techniques used in the shows included:

- Extensive wordplay
- An abundance of street language
- Punning
- Signifying
- Verbal put-downs
- Mocking of an enemy's relatives
- Chanting of verses of ridicule
- Using the whole body (including bent knees) for dancing and communicating feelings
- Admiring trickster figures
- Verbal quickness and wit.

During the 1930s the *Amos 'n' Andy* radio show starred white actors doing blackface comedy. It was the most popular of all radio shows, but when television came in, it was hardly appropriate to have white actors pretending to be black. So in 1951 when the show moved to television, the producers put together a “politically correct” version and hired black performers. By today’s standards the show was both racist and stereotyped, and it lost its sparkle and was soon dropped. However, critic Joe Franklin said that the blacks on the show worked to “prepare the ground for the acceptance of real blacks in the American cultural mainstream.”

In the 1950s as everyone became more aware of racism leading up to the desegregation of schools, which the US Supreme Court had mandated to happen during the mid-1950s, all aspects of show business became less and less segregated. The “misspelling” of words had always been considered a negative on the part of immigrants, whether they were African-Americans or other newcomers, but after desegregation was the law, wordplay that included all kinds of original spelling became a part of humor. For example, it led to a kind of wordplay centered around the creative naming that we see today in the variety of new spellings of *Disk Jockey*, i.e. *Deejay*, *DJing*, *Djin*, and *DJ'n*. There is even more variety in the names of groups or individuals: *DJ Kool Herc*, *DJAJ*, *Blue Jays*, *DJ Clark Kent*, *DJ Craze*, *DJ Evil Dee*, *DJ Kay Gee*, *DJ Jazzy Jay*, *DJ Timmy*, *Juicy J*, and *Time*. *Run DMC* was named to honor the speed with which he ran between turntables. New spellings for *Master of Ceremonies* include *MC*, *Emcee*, *MCing*, *MC'n*, *Emceein*, and *Femcee* for a woman.

### American Indian Humor

One of the jokes we remember from Don’s teaching came from a linguistics class of graduate students. It occurred a week before Halloween, which comes at the end of October. This means that the dozen or so students had been in class long enough to get to know each other, and when the subject of Halloween costumes came up, a Caucasian male turned to an Indian woman in the class and jokingly told her she could “put a feather in your hair and come as an Indian.” She shot right back, “And you could put a feather in your ass and come as a turkey.”

Of course everybody laughed, but what interested us about the exchange was that while the joke could definitely be interpreted as hostile, the students in the class were genuinely amused, as were the two “performers,” who seemed proud of their quick wit. However, it is important to remember that the two students were friends and that the class was small enough and had been meeting long enough to have developed a sense of intimacy and trust.

Undoubtedly the people who were living in what is now called the United States had a sense of humor and created jokes – once they realised that they

didn't need to be afraid of Christopher Columbus who in 1492 had accidentally bumped into land where he found "strange"-looking people. He had been trying to sail around the world in order to find a less expensive way for Europeans to trade with the Far East. He was looking for the East Indies, and so even though these people did not look like what he expected, he decided that he must have come to the West Indies, and so he called them *Indians*.

Eventually, it was discovered that there were many different groups of these so-called *Indians*, which had names of their own. This is still a confusing issue, with some tribes voting to go back to their long-ago names, while other tribes have voted to stick with the names that they are presently noted for, e.g. Cheyenne, Ojibwa, Comanche, and Hopi. The Navajo Nation, which is centered in the American Southwest, recently took a vote on going back to their name of *Dine* (pronounced *Dinay*), but finally decided to keep their name of *Navajo*. The Navajos live mostly in the American Southwest, where there are large "reservations," meaning that the land is deeded (preserved for, or owned by) a particular Indian tribe. The tribes are held to the same national laws as are the fifty-two American states, but they also have their own laws. One of the reasons that the Navajos decided to keep their more recent name is that they are famous throughout the world for the Navajo rugs, which they weave from the wool of the sheep that they raise. They are also famous for Navajo jewelry, made from the turquoise and silver found on their land, and also since the mid-1960s for the Navajo code-talkers, who helped America win World War II.

The code-talkers were a group of over 200 Navajo men who during World War II joined a special unit of the US Marines, where they helped to develop and then became the sole speakers of a complex system of radio communication in the South Pacific. They were responsible for the only code that the Japanese never broke. It was based on the ancient language of the Navajo people. The code was devised by Navajo speakers and was never written down. Its grammar and vocabulary are very different from English and other current languages. Of course in their original language there had been no names for such concepts as ships, submarines, guns, and tanks, so these modern tools of war were given metaphorical names. For example, tanks were named after Navajo turtles, and ships and submarines were given the names of various kinds of fish.

We started giving serious thought to the matter of how American Indians fit into contemporary humor when we watched an online American Indian comedy slam hosted by Charlie Hill, a pioneering comedian from the Oneida tribe in Wisconsin. We smiled at the program announcement because printed across the bottom of the opening screen was "NO RESERVATIONS NEEDED!" This statement had a double meaning in that, first, viewers would not need a pre-purchased ticket to see the show, and, second, it alludes to the fact that in North America, the original inhabitants were separated from the immigrants and put



on allotted pieces of land identified as “a Hopi Indian reservation” or a “Navajo Indian reservation,” etc. Although Indians are no longer forced to stay on their reservations, there are still many laws and complications that work to keep Indians in a minority status whether or not they choose to take advantage of the benefits provided by the federal government to Indian tribes, or to move off the reservations into regular towns or onto other farms or ranches, where differing systems of law sometimes cause confusion and conflicts.

As part of introducing himself, comedian Charlie Hill said that his tribe used to be from New York, but then “We had a little real-estate problem.” He was referring to how in the 1800s, Indians in the Eastern part of the United States either had to fight American soldiers or agree to live on the “reservations” which were placed on less valuable parts of the land. At the time of the comedy slam, Charlie Hill lived with his wife, who is Navajo, in the Midwest, but he often travels to Los Angeles (and to many other places) where he performs. Like most Indian children, who learn both English and their native language, his four children speak English and Navajo.

He explained that ever since he was a child, he wanted to be a stand-up comedian. On television, he had loved watching Jackie Gleason, Jack Paar, and Johnny Carson. He learned to write by listening to comedians’ jokes and then writing down the ones he thought were best. As a young man, he headed to Los Angeles with only a backpack and a hand drum, which is small enough that it can be tied with a piece of leather around the owner’s wrist. Hill’s father had given it to him as part of wishing him well when he left the reservation. Once Hill was in Los Angeles, he hung out at The Comedy Store, where he met David Letterman, Richard Pryor, and Michael Keaton, all of whom invited him to make appearances on their shows. He’s been in the comedy business ever since.

Many “American Indians” still live on their tribe’s assigned “reservation,” but many others have chosen to move into towns or cities and to work and pay taxes just like other Americans do. The performers in the comedy slam were young men from different tribes. They included Vaughn Eaglebear, Howie Miller, Larry Omaha, Jr., Redwater, Jim Ruell, and Mark Yafee. Hill introduced himself by explaining that he didn’t really like telling us that he was a “Native American,” because “How could that be true?” His family had been living on this continent long before it was called “America,” and so how could he be “a native” of something that wasn’t even here for his ancestors? Neither did he want to introduce himself as *Indian*, because that was just “one of Columbus’s mistakes” when he thought he had arrived at the West Indies. One of Charlie Hill’s goals seemed to be to teach the audience many of the things that American children should have been taught in US History classes, but apparently were not.

On the show, one of the young comedians who was a college student told how the previous semester he took a class in “Native American Culture” and



got a “C.” He was the only Native American in the class, and he didn’t realize until afterwards that he should have copied the test answers “from the little Greek girl who sat in front of him.” Another performer told how when his cell phone had once started making smoke, the guy sitting next to him asked if he was sending a text message, i.e. a “smoke signal,” which years ago really was one of the ways that Indian tribes, especially those living on plains or desert land, could send messages to Indians living many miles from each other.

Hill stepped in to say that there’s a slight, but important, difference between the self-deprecating humor that he and several of his young apprentices use, and the “old humor” in which comedians would “make fun of the way we dance, we sing, our drums, our names, our religion, our rituals – you name it!” He explained that his goal as a comedian is to get people to laugh *with* us, not *at* us. In his closing statement, he said “It’s child abuse to make children sing *Land of my Fathers* because the founding fathers of America were actually shooters and losers!”

Then he added that the reason the United States is called “the land of the free” is that “nobody paid for it!”

One of the best contemporary American Indian authors who writes stories that are both humorous and autobiographical is Sherman Alexie, whose 2005 *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fist Fight in Heaven* was published by Grove Press. The book is set on the Coeur d’Alene Indian reservation in northern Idaho and much of the humor comes from the way Alexie mixes Indian and White naming practices, as when he writes:

I was always falling down; my Indian name was Junior Falls Down.

Sometimes it was Bloody Nose or Steal-His-Lunch. Once it was Cries-Like-a-White-Boy, even though none of us had seen a white boy cry.

An even more popular book by Sherman Alexie is named *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, which was published by Little, Brown in 2007. This was his first book published specifically for “young adult” readers, and it won the US National Book Award in that category. One example of the ways it mixes Indian and mainstream culture is in the section where he and his friend Rowdy visit the mysterious Turtle Lake, and dare each other to jump in. One of the scary parts about it is that no one has ever found the bottom of the lake, which got its name because of being home to a giant snapping turtle that eats Indians. He calls it a “Jurassic turtle,” a “Steven Spielberg turtle,” and “A King Kong vs. the Giant Reservation turtle.”

### **Gaelic Humor (Irish, Scottish, and Welsh)**

Few Americans realize how many American English words have Gaelic roots, meaning that they probably came from, or at least were influenced by, the

speech of ancestors who had lived in Ireland, Scotland, or Wales. In 1746, after the Battle of Culloden, the Highland Scottish culture was outlawed. This included the carrying of firearms, the hurling of tabors, playing bagpipes, speaking the Scots Gaelic language, and the wearing of kilts and tartan plaids. As a result, masses of people from the Highlands fled to Africa, America, Australia, Ireland, and New Zealand. About 200,000 Scots migrated to Northern Ireland, and then millions of their descendants migrated to America during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and the early part of the twentieth centuries. By 1776 (the year of America's independence) almost half of the people from Ulster had crossed the Atlantic. This meant that one out of every seven American colonists was Scots-Irish.

They weren't especially welcomed in Boston because they were intolerant, violent, and unruly. Some went on to Philadelphia where Benjamin Franklin estimated that one-third of the city's population were from England, one-third from Germany, and one-third from areas of Scotland. Most of the Scots-Irish kept going south towards the Appalachian Mountains and through the Cumberland Gap. They settled in what was called the Southwestern frontier. They wore coonskin caps, carried Kentucky rifles, and were fond of whiskey. Some of them went through the Cumberland Gap and made it all the way to Texas, with the most famous being Davy Crockett, who good-naturedly described himself as "fresh from the backwoods, half-horse, half-alligator, a little touched with snapping turtle, can wade the Mississippi, leap the Ohio, ride a streak of lightning, slide down a honey locust and not get scratched."

The Irish had a head start as storytellers partly because the men got extra practice in Irish pubs, where the best storytellers were often rewarded by having their drinks paid for. The history of Ireland also shows that they carried their jokes around the world. In 1851, 30 percent of the population in Australia were Irish. One reason is that the Irish used Australia as a penal colony, giving rise to the joke about an Irish girl who was convicted of a crime and sent for a seven-year sentence to Australia. When she returned "home" to Ireland, she committed another crime just so she could go back to Australia.

Well-known comedians and authors with Irish roots include Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy, Jason Byrne, Louis CK, Stephen Colbert, Neil Delamere, Chris Farley, Will Farrell, Kathy Griffin, Rich Hall, Bob Hope, Jay Leno, Melissa McCarthy, Conan O'Brien, Rosie O'Donnell, Mickey Rooney, Micky Shaughnessy, and Steven Wright. Historical figures whose work is still read and talked about include Samuel Beckett, William Congreve, James Joyce, Flannery O'Connor, George Bernard Shaw, Jonathan Swift, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, J. M. Synge, and Oscar Wilde.

Starting in 2001, teenagers in America as well as in other English-speaking countries had a brand new set of humorous books to read. They were Eoin Colfer's *Artemis Fowl* books. The first one was simply named after the

teenage hero, *Artemis Fowl*, with the follow-up books entitled with his name followed by the subtitles: *The Arctic Incident*, *The Eternity Code*, *The Opal Deception*, *The Lost Colony*, *The Time Paradox*, and *The Atlantis Complex*. Colfer described Artemis as the “most ingenious criminal mind in history,” while reviewers compared the various characters to the rogues in such books as Sean O’Casey’s *Juno and the Paycock*, J. P. Donleavy’s *The Ginger Man*, and John Synge’s *Playboy of the Western World*.

A funny cartoon that one of our students brought to class was an illustration of St. Patrick, dressed in his high Pope’s hat while driving the snakes out of Ireland. They were all crowded into a small car and the snakes were saying such things as “I’M GONNA BE SICK!” “ARE WE THERE YET?” “I HAVE TO GO TO THE BATHROOM,” and “HOW MUCH FURTHER?” Such Irish words as *banshee*, *galore*, *youse*, *shenanigan*, *smithereens*, and *shanty* have brought a humorous tone into English.

Wales, which is the smallest of these countries, had fewer immigrants coming to America, and so it plays a smaller role in current English. However, according to a *Welch* page on Wikipedia, about ten towns, and a couple of mountains have been named to honor someone named *Welch*, *Welsh*, or *Welches*. The page also cites a popular brand of grape juice named *Welch’s*, which is defined as an archaic spelling of *Welsh*.

The term is most often used as a verb in a statement accusing someone of *welching* or “going back” on a previously agreed-upon deal. This apparently developed from the idea that people needed to be careful in their dealings with someone from Wales. An even stronger statement of the same message comes in an old rhyme, which was still being printed in books of nursery rhymes when our children were young. But thankfully we haven’t seen it in any of the books we buy for our grandchildren.

Taffy was a Welshman; Taffy was a thief,  
Taffy came to my house and stole a side of beef.  
I went to Taffy’s house; Taffy wasn’t home.  
Taffy came to my house and stole a mutton bone.  
I went to Taffy’s house; Taffy was in bed.  
I picked up a poker and flung it at his head.

Of course there is humor about Irish kilts, as shown on a computer meme which is nothing more than a picture of Scottish plaid with a message printed in white: “KILT: IT’S WHAT HAPPENED TO THE LAST PERSON WHO CALLED IT A SKIRT.” In another online cartoon, a man is standing in front of two restroom doors that are exactly the same. A silhouette of a person in a kilt is pictured on one door, while a silhouette of a person wearing a skirt is pictured on the other door. They look exactly the same. The confused man apparently has to just stand there until someone comes out of one of the toilet

booths so that he can guess which one he should open. The other kind of joke about Scots is the old saying that they have “short arms and long pockets,” meaning that if you are out with a Scottish friend you are probably going to have to be the one to pick up the tab.

Of course most of the immigrants who came to America had to be careful with how they spent their money. People from Scotland had the reputation of being especially good money-managers, as shown by the way they were described as having “short arms and long pockets.” This meant that if you went out to eat or drink with someone from Scotland, you would most likely be the first one to find your money when it was time to pay.

However, the story of how *Scotch* (adhesive) *Tape* got its name is a good illustration of how what was a slightly negative reputation gradually changed into a positive connotation. The story begins back in the 1920s and 1930s when the 3M Company in St. Paul, Minnesota was experimenting with a new see-through product called cellophane. They put some adhesive on the back of the cellophane and sent it to their body-shop painter to try it out. The story is that the painter became frustrated with the product and told a messenger who had come to check on it, “Take this tape back to those Scotch bosses of yours and tell them to put more adhesive on it.”

Apparently the “Scotch bosses” got the message and loaded on more adhesive. Then as a kind of joke, the PR department decided to call this new invention *Scotch Tape*, with the idea that customers would love getting what was clearly identified as a bargain. The company was clever in helping people remember their name by putting the word *Scotch* in such related products as *Scotchgard*, *Scotchlite*, and *Scotch-Brite* and by designing all of their packaging to include reproductions of Scotch plaid. Their advertising campaign was helped out between 1944 and 1964 by *Scotty McTape*, a cartoon figure wearing a kilt.

### Hispanic Humor

Columbus’ voyage had been sponsored by Queen Isabella of Spain, but after the news about the discovery of the “new land” spread across the world, many Europeans, along with Spaniards, made extensive preparations and encouraged people to set sail for the “new land.” Spanish-speaking explorers and settlers arrived mostly on southern shores, which relates to the fact that most inhabitants of Mexico and South America speak Spanish, along with many residents of the lower parts of the United States, for example, Florida, Louisiana, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and Southern California. Northern Europeans and people from the British Isles began arriving further north, which relates to the fact that English and French were the main non-indigenous languages spoken in what is called North America, i.e. Canada and the United States, while Spanish

as well as a variety of Indian languages were spoken in South America. Over the years, the Hispanic culture developed through trade and intermarriage, which is why Spanish, along with other tribal languages and some English, is spoken throughout much of South America.

In this “quickie” history through the 1600s and early 1700s, there seemed to be space “in the new world” for whoever was willing to come, no matter what language they spoke. Between 1607 and 1707, thirteen colonies of England were established all along the East coast of North America, i.e. Massachusetts (including what became Maine), New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Connecticut. The middle colonies were New York (including Vermont), and what became New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware. The southern colonies were Maryland and Virginia (including Kentucky and West Virginia), North and South Carolina, and Georgia. These were considered to be “colonies of England” until the mid-1770s when the colonists decided to declare their independence from England. Their decision resulted in the Revolutionary War, which was a very real hardship not only to the British soldiers who came to quell the revolution, but also to the settlers and to the indigenous peoples living in the affected areas. In the United States, all the indigenous people came to be called *Indians*, which was a surprise to some of the tribal groups, who had mostly kept their distance from each other.

Indian tribes had their own languages, but when they began to interact with the newcomers, who spoke Spanish, a mixed culture developed, which even generations later is different from either of the groups of people who speak mainly English or mainly Spanish. These people are known as Hispanics, or as *Latinos*, *Chicanos*, and *Mexican Americans*. At the turn of the century, there were over 26 million Hispanics living throughout the American Southwest, and millions more living in and around New York City, where they had migrated from Europe or from South America.

It's impossible, of course, to succinctly describe their humor, but here are a few general statements. Magical realism is appreciated in the blending of exaggeration, fables, and cultural lore. Rudolfo Anaya's 1972 book, *Bless Me Ultima*, was widely read and appreciated and so was Laura Esquivel's 1992 novel, *Like Water for Chocolate*. Jose R. Reyna, a professor in the Foreign Language Department at the University of New Mexico, spoke at our ASU campus and explained that instead of relying on American-style stand-up comedy, Chicanos most often express humor through jokes, jests, and anecdotes. He gave an example of a Mexican proverb that is used around the world: “En boca cerrada, no entran moscas” (If you keep your mouth shut, flies won't enter). Many of the *corridos* songs and stories originally came from the so-called “corridor,” which is the space of land separating the most populated areas of Mexico from the more populated areas of the United States. The meaning has been extended to apply to any Hispanics whose lives are surrounded by non-Spanish speakers.

An example is Sandra Cisneros' 1984 *The House on Mango Street*, in which the main character explains that the records her father plays on Sunday morning when he is shaving "sound like sobbing," and when John Nichols tells a forest ranger in his 1974 *The Milagro Beanfield War* that "These people won't confide in you, in that uniform, Carl if you was Cesar Chavez, Pedro Infante, Cantinflas, and Lee Travino all rolled into one."

Professor Reyna went on to say that many jokes created by Mexicans (Hispanics) were either sex-related or were about conflicts between Hispanics and other ethnic groups. But there is also a growing set of jokes that rely on language play between Spanish and English. This is a kind of "inside" Hispanic humor that appears in settings as different as gang graffiti and tagging, the names of businesses, and the titles of mainstream movies and television programs. Even young children know they are making a kind of joke when they describe bilingual education as "when the teacher says everything twice, but you only understand it once."

If Hispanics are telling the jokes, they find ways to amuse both Hispanic and mainstream audiences as with this well-known joke told by Jeff Valdez: "My brothers' names are Alfonso, Lorenzo and Ramon... [and me] Jeff. I guess that was right about the time my parents assimilated ... right there."

### **Jewish Humor**

Of all the ethnic groups in America, Jews are the ones with the biggest reputation for creating humor, both professionally and in their daily lives. One reason is multilingualism, meaning that for generations Jews have been very conscious of the intricacies of language because many of them have spoken more than one language. For example, they spoke Yiddish at home, Hebrew at the synagogue, and then the language of the surrounding community in everyday dealings with non-Jews, either at school, or at work. Joseph Boskin says that "Jews have wrought a distinctively hard-driving, spontaneous humor of concrete immediacy that bursts with retaliation." As examples, he lists sarcastic rejoinders, rapid-fire jokes, and happy quips that even today continue to reflect the rhythms and the pace of New York City. Comedian Henny Youngman provided a good example with this little story: "Fellow walks up to me and says, 'You see a cop around here?'" I say, "No," and he says "Stick 'em up!"

Prior to World War II, many Jewish families from New York City would drive north for summer vacations in an area in the Catskill Mountains that was referred to as "the Borscht Belt." A big part of their stay would be to attend comedy shows featuring such stars as Belle Barth, Fanny Brice, Totie Fields, Sophie Tucker, and Ed Wynn. When censors came and the comedians were telling a risqué joke, the performers would slip into Yiddish, the Jewish

language that they had learned in their native countries before they came to the United States. The jokes were often about “Jewish princesses” and/or their mothers. Yiddish expressions added to their flavor, as in the joke about the time a psychiatrist told a Jewish mother that her son had an Oedipus complex. The mother responded with “Oedipus, schmoedipus, just so long as he likes his mother!”

Leo Rosten has listed the following jocular expressions as English translations of well-established Yiddish words:

Get lost!  
 You should live so long!  
 Who needs it?  
 He should excuse the expression.  
 It shouldn't happen to a dog.  
 On him it looks good.

Yiddish words that have come into English include *nebbish* for a loser or sad sack, *schmaltz* (literally “chicken fat”) for overdone sentimentality, *schmear* for bribing or “greasing the palm,” *nosh* for snack, and *shlep* for “carrying things, even oneself, in an undignified way.”

During the 1980s and on into the 1990s, hundreds of jokes were told about “spoiled” Jewish princesses, but many listeners suspected they were really jokes against the entire feminist movement. Henry Spaulding used the term “honey-coated barbs” to describe the kind of hostility that often appears in jokes about the things that Jews love the most, including their mothers and their attractive daughters.

Dolf Zillman says that Jewish humor exhibits two antithetical statures: disparagement and superiority, as shown in this story about the Israeli Knesset lamenting all of the challenges that Israel faces. One member of the Knesset suggests that Israel go to war against the United States. Another member says, “What?” “Such a war wouldn't last 10 minutes.” “I know! I know!” he says, “But then we would be a conquered country and the Americans would send us aid. They would build roads and hospitals and send food and agricultural experts.” “But,” says another member of the Knesset, “What if we win?”

Between 1929 and 1945, there was a popular Jewish radio program named *The Goldbergs*. The language of the show used Yiddish intonation, proverbs, and sentence patterns as in “Better a crust of bread and enjoy it than a cake that gives you indigestion.” The philosophy behind much Jewish humor is their history of marginalization. As they were viewing their own “differentness” as compared to the “differentness” of other groups who had come to America, they viewed American life from the edge, and therefore came up with fresh and funny observations. Because of their marginalization, they were attracted to professions that were not “in the mainstream.” Even those who were not



professional comedians often worked in such related fields as theater, popular music, vaudeville, and other marginalized professions.

Another reason that Jews became such successful professional comedians is that as families they stuck together, with the older generation making places for younger family members. For example, the comedian Albert Brooks grew up in Hollywood as the son of the famous radio comedian Harry Einstein. The father's stage name was Parkyarkarkus and he was a successful stand-up comedian by the time he was 21. Actor and producer Rob Reiner is the son of writer and producer Carl Reiner. Marlo Thomas is the daughter of Danny Thomas, who although he was not Jewish told many Yiddish stories. The Marx Brothers (Groucho, Harpo, Chico, Gummo, and Zeppo) were one of the first groups to catch the public's attention. Groucho was the leader and was so good that he could speak English without an accent and even speak "Brooklynese." The boys' mother had worked in vaudeville and so the boys grew up around performers and had a chance to see what real people went through as they struggled to become "Americanized." When they first worked as a group, they divided up their characteristics to imitate people in different stages of "Americanization." Harpo was unable to speak English but he could make a number of zany faces while performing sight gags. Chico was in the second stage of speaking English and making bad puns, but he could also play the piano, fake an outrageous Italian accent, and do zany singing and dancing. Gummo could speak English without an accent, while Groucho could speak "Brooklynese," as well as Standard English. Zeppo was so good that he could play the straight man to Groucho.

### Points of Departure

1. Find a joke in this chapter that you have seen in a slightly different form. Try to figure out what effect is caused by "the difference" between our printed version and the way you heard the joke. Was the difference affected by ethnicity or something else?
2. Go back and see how many of the mentioned comedians on Charlie Hill's American Indian comedy slam have linguistic touches in their name that identify them as being of Indian origin. In what ways are these names professionally beneficial? Can you see any way that they might be disadvantageous?
3. Pretend that you are going into showbusiness. Consider your name and whether you would want to choose a new name so that it would be easy for people to say and remember, but would also have a "touch of difference" that would attract attention and help audiences remember who you are.



4. Do you always expect African-American comics to make jokes about racial differences as opposed to other issues? Give some examples to support your answer. Here are the names of some popular comedians that you might want to investigate online and see if their original name is given: Whoopi Goldberg, Arsenio Hall, Bernie Mac, Pigmeat Markham, Tracy Morgan, Eddie Murphy, Chris Rock, and Wanda Sykes.
5. Do you think that the creative spelling used in hip-hop has changed people's attitudes toward spelling, especially when they are creating names either for people or other aspects of life?
6. Here are some examples of puns that Norman Lear carefully crafted for Archie Bunker in the old television show, *All in the Family*. We have listed them alphabetically, but as you read them notice how they illustrate Archie Bunker's prejudices. Was he insulting foreigners, minorities, or women? How are these puns similar to mondegreens?
  - a. Blackberry Finn instead of Huckleberry Finn
  - c. A groinocologist instead of a gynecologist
  - d. Milton Berlin instead of Milton Berle
  - e. Pushy Imported Ricans instead of Puerto Ricans
  - f. A Regular Marco Polish instead of Marco Polo
  - g. Welfare incipients instead of Welfare recipients.

### 3 Irony, Parody, and Satire in Art

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You are in a hurry to get somewhere and it starts raining, but that's OK, because you have an umbrella. But then it starts raining hard, and the wind starts blowing – really hard – and your umbrella is turned inside out. It's ironic that the umbrella, which is supposed to keep you out of the rain, is now an additional problem for you to manage in the rainstorm. But this is also funny visual imagery, because the umbrella, which is supposed to look like an umbrella, no longer looks like an umbrella; this is incongruity. But your “mind's eye” knows what an umbrella is supposed to look like (they all look basically the same), and your brain is able to see the differences between the umbrella as it is and the umbrella as it should be. Your brain has managed to accomplish incongruity resolution.

All of the arts, including music and literature, are based on incongruity and incongruity resolution, but actually the sciences and the humanities are also based on this same concept, which is especially important in humor studies. In his *The Act of Creation* (1964), Arthur Koestler states that there are three types of creativity, and that they all relate to incongruity and incongruity resolution. He calls the first type “Artistic Originality,” the second type “Scientific Discovery,” and the third type “Comic Inspiration.” The classification of art is often determined by the nature and the amount of distortion found within the art as compared to, and contrasted with, reality. The realism of the art created by Honoré Daumier, Francisco Goya, Jan Van Eyck, and Diego Velázquez is hardly distorted at all, while the Surrealist art created by Salvador Dalí, Max Ernst, Paul Klee, René Magritte, and Joan Miró is dreamlike in the way that solids appear to become plastic or liquid displays. The Cubism of Georges Braque, Marcel Duchamp, Jacques Lipchitz and Pablo Picasso is one way to paint three-dimensional art on a two-dimensional canvas. The Impressionism of Paul Cezanne, Edgar Degas, Paul Gauguin, Édouard Manet, Claude Monet, Pierre Auguste Renoir, and Georges Seurat gives only a hint of the thing being represented. It is up to the viewer's mind to figure out what the real-world item would actually look like. When people get very close to an Impressionist painting all they see are the individual brush strokes, or perhaps they should be called “brush *tappings*,” because when viewers get close to the kind of

paintings made by Georges Seurat, they can see that the artist has created this particular effect not with “strokes” of a brush, but by making countless tiny dots of pure color.

The Expressionism of African art, or of Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*, or many of Vincent Van Gogh’s works are ways of using art to express emotions. It’s possible to use art to express any of the strong emotions, such as hatred, love, fear, anxiety, etc. A sub-category of Expressionism is Abstract Expressionism – also called “action painting.” Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, and Jackson Pollock all throw, spin, drip, splatter, spray, or drizzle their art onto the canvas, which is why Jackson Pollock is sometimes referred to as “Jack the Dripper.”

Minimalism can be seen in Constantin Brâncuși’s sculpture *Bird in Flight*. It is nothing more than a bronze crescent. Similar to Brâncuși’s bird, the birds in Vincent Van Gogh’s paintings are merely two quick brush-strokes.

Maximalism is not a term commonly used in the art world, but it can be clearly seen in the architecture of the following cathedrals:

- Notre-Dame and Chartres Cathedrals in France
- Lincoln, Salisbury, and Westminster Cathedrals in England
- Florence Cathedral in Italy
- Cologne and Frankfurt Cathedrals in Germany
- Barcelona Cathedral in Spain.

Finally, there is the Dada Movement, which is actually anti-art. Instead of being art, it is a parody of art. The following formula for making a Dadaist poem is posted on Wikipedia:

1. Take a newspaper.
2. Take some scissors.
3. Choose from the newspaper an article of the length you want to make your poem.
4. Cut out the article.
5. Carefully cut out each of the words that make up this article and put them all in a bag.
6. Shake gently.
7. Take out each cutting, one after the other.
8. Copy conscientiously in the order in which the cuttings left the bag.

The question is: Who wrote the poetry – you or the bag?

In *TIME* magazine’s 1997 year-end summary of the “best” and the “worst” accomplishments, editors devoted a half-page to a twilight photo of the *New-York-New-York* hotel, advertised as “the Greatest City in Las Vegas.” They wrote:

OK, it’s a hoot, a building that’s made to look like a jumble of buildings. This massive Las Vegas hotel with a “Central Park-themed” casino takes as its silhouette the Manhattan

skyline and for good measure crams in Grant's Tomb, Ellis Island, and the Statue of Liberty. Did we mention the Coney Island roller coaster? "Tasteless," you say? We say, "beyond tasteless."

At Arizona State University's Barrett Honors College, an amusing sculpture is made from two metal sheets cut into the shape of trees "planted" side by side on the lawn. Each of the trees contains half of a poem that is "written" by letters cut out from the sculpture in such a way that the sun shines through to reveal the six-word poem: "THE SUNLIGHT WEIGHTLESS THROUGH MY FINGERS." Of course, these are referred to as the "Poet Trees."

One of our fellow English professors at ASU has a car license plate that merely says POET. When we congratulated him on the aptness of his plate, he responded, "Yeah, that's my 'poetic license'." One of the events we first attended in the Honors College was the opening-day luncheon held in "The Refectory." When we arrived on the Honors College campus, we asked two or three students where "The Refectory" was, and nobody seemed to know. Finally, a girl said, "Oh, you mean the *Harry Potter Hall*." As soon as we stepped through the door she had pointed toward, we knew we had found it. The Refectory looked so much like the dining hall in the *Harry Potter* films that we thought we had boarded the Hogwarts Express at Platform 9¾, and ended up at Hogwarts. The explanation of its designation is that ASU's Honors College was built within the last decade, and students had been invited to help design it. The students on the committee must have just seen the first *Harry Potter* film.

Our most dramatic example of humorous "architecture" is the City Hall of Tempe, Arizona, the town that is home to our university (ASU). We are quite sure that it is the only City Hall in the world built in the shape of an upside-down pyramid. You have to see it to believe it. And although it is undoubtedly scenic, some of the people who have worked in the building have whispered to us that there are some inconveniences and wasted space where the straight ceilings and floors have to accommodate the slanted outside walls.

### Caricatures and Cartoons

Caricatures are probably the oldest form of pictorial humor. *Caricare* in Latin means "to overload, or exaggerate." The main stylistic devices in cartooning are distortion and exaggeration, and the main subject is famous people. The term *Cartoon* originally came from the Italian word *cartone*, which referred to a strong, heavy paper or pasteboard, i.e. "a carton." It denoted a full-size drawing made on paper as a study for further work, such as making sculptures, frescos, or stained-glass windows. England's *Punch* magazine applied the term to satirical drawings by publishing some parody drafts for frescoes, which were also called *cartoons*. The popularity of *Punch*, an early literary magazine in England devoted to humor, made the term's new meaning of "humorous drawings" permanent.

Today's cartoonists talk about the "Seven-Seconds rule," which is the idea that when people are looking in magazines or newspapers, they just glance (probably for no more than seven seconds) at whatever is on a page and then if something has not caught their eye, they will turn to the next page. This need to grab attention is what makes cartoonists want to shout out their message. Cartoonists invented their own way of "shouting in print" by using all capital letters for newly invented one- or two-syllable words, printed in boldface, e.g. **POW! ZAP! WHAM! ZIP, and ZOWIE!**

Another technique cartoonists use to grab attention is to focus on some intriguing item that might be a symbol for a bigger story. A good example of such a cartoon was drawn in 1966 by David Levine for the *New York Review of Books*. It was a picture of President Lyndon Johnson standing in front of newspaper reporters pulling up his shirt and pointing to a scar on his bare belly. This was just after President Johnson had undergone gallbladder surgery, and he had shocked reporters and photographers, and by extension the general public, by holding a press conference and showing photographers and reporters his scar. There was a kind of vulgar curiosity about the whole matter, and this is what made people stop and take a second look at Levine's cartoon. Once they had glanced at it, clever people realized something was different and so they looked more carefully and discovered that Levine had drawn the scar in the shape of Vietnam. He was communicating the message that the real scar that would forever be associated with President Johnson was the sad story of the War in Vietnam.

Here is an expression which became part of the English language because of how cleverly it played a role in cartoons.

**Teddy Bear:** Toy stuffed bears are named after Theodore (Teddy) Roosevelt who was the US President between 1901 and 1909. He was an avid hunter and on one particular hunting trip, he was the only man not to have made a kill. His fellow hunters felt sorry for him and so captured a young bear and tied it to a tree and then invited President Roosevelt to shoot it. He of course, refused such a "cowardly act." The news spread quickly on the radio, followed by a newspaper cartoon that showed the rough-and-tumble President Roosevelt turning his back on the little bear that was clinging to the trunk of a small tree. The fame of the cartoon inspired a New York toymaker to advertise "Teddy Bears," an item he had already been selling but not with such a catchy name. From all the publicity, the word *teddy bear* entered the language, mainly to refer to stuffed toy bears, but also as an affectionate slang term for a "soft" and "huggable" man.

Other symbols that cartoonists rely on as attention grabbers include:

- Tombstones and the initials RIP (for Rest In Peace)
- Pointing fingers or arrows
- The Trojan Horse waiting to get through a gate

- Skulls or the Grim Reaper
- The three monkeys (“Hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil”)
- The Ghost of Christmas Past
- Railroad tracks not matching up
- Superman.

Other common symbols include snakes, wolves, fantasy characters, and old-fashioned baby buggies (which are more mysterious than modern-day strollers) and new interpretations of such familiar items as a Big Stick (especially for those who speak softly), and characters from famous children’s books. After the September 11, 2001 *al-Qaeda* attack when America was looking for help, cartoonist Randy Bish drew a picture of the Cowardly Lion, the Scarecrow, and the Tin Man from *The Wizard of Oz*. France was depicted as the Cowardly Lion with “No Courage”; the UN was depicted as the Scarecrow with “No Brain”; while Iraq was depicted as the Tin Man with “No Heart.”

If we don’t count images of the American flag, probably the American symbol most often used in political cartoons is the Statue of Liberty. Variations on the Statue of Liberty cartoons show how symbols can change over time while still retaining some of their original meaning. Thomas Nast’s 1889 cartoon of the Statue of Liberty had her carrying a large placard that read, “Home of the Trust, Land of the Plutocracy.” Other placards were labeled “Coffee Trust,” “Sugar Trust,” “Land Trust,” and “Standard Oil Trust.” This cartoon was captioned, “The Rising of the Usurpers.” Much of the messaging in this cartoon is as relevant today as it was in Thomas Nast’s time.

Statue of Liberty cartoons, while making many different political points, still rely on images that in most people’s minds are “feminine.” In 1960, Doug MacPherson drew Fidel Castro and Nikita Khrushchev having a picnic on the head of the statue. In 1971, Daniel Aguila drew her with shortened robes under the cutline “Lib and let lib!” In 1980, Doug Marlett showed her sweeping dirt under a rug designed as a flag. In 1984, Signe Wilkinson showed her going through a sewing factory shouting “OK, you huddled masses, I know you’re in here!” In 2001, after 9/11, the Statue of Liberty was depicted with a tear falling from one eye, while in another cartoon two sad eyes reflected the burning Twin Towers. In 2003, the Statue of Liberty is expressing womanly impatience as she says “Geez, two years and still no capture of Osama ... or Saddam ... or Al Qaeda ... or WMD ... or the Taliban, or Justice or...” A side note read “In a city accustomed to the New York Minute.” And in 2005, Nick Adams won the Pulitzer Prize for showing President Bush sitting on top of the statue’s crown wearing earphones hooked to a satellite dish, which had replaced the flame in her extended arm.

In today’s polarized political climate, people are so frustrated with each other that really funny cartoons are hard to find, because today, cartoons are

mostly hostile and accusatory. They illustrate the idea of the MICH theory – Moderate Intergroup Conflict Humor – which says that people have to be a little bothered by something to expend the energy to make a joke. But if people are so bothered that they are really angry, they want to express their hostility in something more powerful than a joke. Polite sensitivities have been shelved, while bold gender-based power plays have become the norm.

Linguist Deborah Tannen relates the change to the fact that lines are blurring between public and private. Communications Professor Kathleen Jamieson says that tough language frames the attacker as tougher than the person attacked. “Joking” is now coming through sexist insults that are repeated by the late-night comedians. Sarah Palin told Fox News that President Obama did not have the “cojones” to get tough on illegal immigration. In a debate between Nevada Senate candidates, Sharron Angle zinged Harry Reid with “Man up, Harry Reid.” Although Angle’s zinger got the most publicity, the phrase had already been used by Missouri Democrat Robin Carnahan in a Senate debate with Republican Roy Blount. Delaware Senate candidate Christine O’Donnell told a radio interviewer that her primary opponent should “put his man pants on.”

Linguist George Lakoff explained that the Republican worldview emphasizes masculinity and strength, while Democrats underscore the more feminine quality of empathy. This is why, “If you’re a woman candidate who is a conservative, then you have to say you’re more masculine than the other guy.” However, there’s a double standard in this bold, new talk because it doesn’t go over well for a man to tell a female candidate to be more ladylike. Colorado Republican Senate candidate Ken Buck faced repercussions when he said that, unlike his primary opponent Jane Norton, “I do not wear high heels.” In California, Governor candidate Jerry Brown apologized to Republican Meg Whitman after an aide was recorded calling her a whore. In such a polarized political climate, it’s sometimes difficult to know what the message of a hostile cartoon might be.

The July 21, 2008 cover of *The New Yorker* magazine showed Michelle Obama in the White House fist-bumping President Barack Obama. Michelle had an Afro hairdo, and an AK 47 assault rifle hanging over her shoulder. President Obama was wearing a turban, and on the wall behind him was a picture of Osama Bin Laden also wearing a turban. On first blush, this would seem to be an anti-Obama cartoon, but it was the cover of *The New Yorker*, a very liberal magazine. Perhaps like Archie Bunker and Edith and Meathead in *All in the Family*, this cartoon was designed to appeal to both sides of the debate. After a storm of controversy, Barry Blitt, the artist, defended his cover as “satire.” He said that it was so exaggerated that everyone should have recognized it as satire. But we would suggest that the cover is ambivalent. For people on the far left, it’s clearly satire; for people on the far right, it was a sad depiction of the “New State of the Union.”



## Comics, Comix, and the Graphic Novel

One of the ironies of old comic books is that the price on the cover is the exact opposite of the actual price of the comic book. *Little Lulu* was one of the first comic books. The price on the cover of these early comic books (1933) was a dime (10 cents). But these books are so significant and so rare to comic-book collectors that today they will pay huge sums of money to own particular early editions.

In 1934 D.C. Comics started publishing their superhero comic books. These superheroes include *Superman*, *Batman*, *Wonder Woman*, *Green Lantern*, *The Flash*, *Aquaman*, *Black Canary*, *Hawkman*, *Supergirl*, *Hawk Girl*, *Green Arrow*, *Martian Manhunter*, *Cyborg*, *Static*, *Zatanna*, and *Shazam*. In 1939, Marvel Comics was founded, and its superheroes included *Iron Man*, *Captain America*, *Hulk*, *Thor*, *Dr. Strange*, *Spider-Man*, *Dead Pool*, *Wolverine*, *Daredevil*, *Ms. Marvel*, and *Antman*. *The Avengers* (*Iron Man*, *Captain America*, *Wasp*, *Giant Man*, *Black Widow*, *Thor*, *Hulk* and *Loki*), *Guardians of the Galaxy*, (*Drax*, *Gamora*, *Star Lord*, *Rocket Racoon*, *Groot* and *Quasar*), *Fantastic Four* (*Mr. Fantastic*, *Invisible Woman*, *Human Torch*, and *Thing*), and *X-Men* (*Angel*, *Beast*, *Cyclops*, *Iceman*, *Magneto*, *Marvel Girl*, and many more, are all subdivisions of Marvel Comics.

The original *Captain Marvel* was published by Fawcett Comics, and in the 1940s it outsold *Superman*. Ironically, in the 1970s, DC Comics purchased the original *Captain Marvel* character, but they could no longer put his name on a front cover. So this comic was called *Shazam!* (after the wizard who granted Captain Marvel his powers).

Then, in 1952, along came the first issue of *Mad Magazine*, a satiric magazine that has had a great deal of public influence, along with *Harvard Lampoon*, *National Lampoon*, and *Punch* (which is no longer published). Today's comics range from simple domestic humor such as *The Family Circus* to the sophisticated social and political satire of Gary Trudeau's *Doonesbury*. *Cathy* takes on the problems of single professional women. *BC*, *The Wizard of Id*, *Broom Hilda*, *Zippy* and many more offer a combination of simple amusement and allegorical meaning.

*Underground Comix* are small-press or self-published comic books that tend to be socially relevant or satirical in nature. Since they are not ruled by the Comics Code Authority, they often include references to explicit drug use, sexuality, and violence. They were most popular in the United States between 1968 and 1975 and in the United Kingdom between 1973 and 1974. Robert Crumb is the "Father of Underground Comix." The distorted heads and enlarged feet of Crumb's drawings came from his LSD-distorted view of people and symbols. Gilbert Shelton was another drug-inspired underground comix writer of the 1960s. His well-received parody of the 1960s hippie drug culture was designed



not to preach, but to entertain. Shelton also created *Wonder Wart-Hog* as a parody of superhero comics.

At the opposite end of the spectrum from underground comix are coffee-table comic books that are usually about well-known characters. They are for people in a nostalgic mood who enjoy browsing and reminiscing:

Joe Adamson's *Bugs Bunny: Fifty Years and Only One Grey Hare* (1990)

Berkeley Breathed's *Bloom County Babylon: Five Years of Basic Naughtiness* (1986)

Walt Kelly's *Pluperfect Pogo* (1987)

Bill Watterson's *The Calvin and Hobbes Tenth Anniversary Book* (1995).

Between the underground comix and the coffee-table comics, mainstream collections include Scott Adams' *The Dilbert Principle*, Charles Schulz's *Happiness Is a Warm Puppy*, *Home Is on Top of a Dog House*, *I Need All the Friends I Can Get*, and *Security is a Thumb and a Blanket*.

Some of these "Middleground Comics" can be quite controversial. John Callahan was a cartoonist who was paralyzed in an automobile accident shortly after his 21st birthday. He drew controversial cartoons about disabilities. One of his most famous showed a dark-skinned street beggar carrying a sign that read, "Please help me. I am blind and black, but not musical." In another cartoon, a man with two prosthetic hands was ordering a drink, and the bartender said, "Sorry Sam, you can't hold your liquor." When under the title, "The Alzheimer Hoedown," he showed confused couples unable to "return to the girl that you just left," he received an angry letter from the St. Louis chapter of the Alzheimer's Association.

Many early comic strips became so popular that they have been recycled to make social commentary about current events. For instance, there are "Dagwood sandwiches," and "Wimpy Burgers." And there are Hans and Franz on Saturday Night Live (patterned after Hans and Fritz, the Katzenjammer Kids). Hans und Franz are actually Dana Carvey (Hans) and Kevin Nealon (Franz) in muscular body suits. *Tarzan* and *Popeye* have become movies. And *Little Orphan Annie* was a Broadway musical. And of course there are Buster Brown shoes, with the advertisement: "I'm Buster Brown. I live in a shoe. Here's my dog Tige, he lives in one too." Actually, except for the dog, we all live in shoes.

On May 1, 1953, Walt Kelly introduced a character named Simple J. Malarkey into his *Pogo* comic strip. This character was clearly a caricature of Senator Joseph McCarthy. In 1954, when *The Providence Bulletin* issued an ultimatum that it would drop the strip if Malarkey's face appeared in the strip again, Kelly started drawing Simple J. Malarkey with a bag over his head. Kelly thought that Malarkey's new look was appropriate because the bag over his head resembled a klansman's hood.

Johnny Hart, the creator of the “B.C.” (“Before Christ”) daily comic strip also got into world news when one of his strips was printed in *The Arab News*. It showed a cave man standing on a hill saying, “God, if you’re up there, give me a sign.” A huge rain storm comes down from Heaven, and the soaked cave man says, “Well, we know two things,” and then he tells what the two things are: “He’s up there. And he’s got a sense of humor.” Both the feature editor and the editor-in-chief were sentenced to lashing and prison terms for failing to recognize the blasphemy. Their sentences were reduced after the incident caused an international furor.

Graphic novels have also become a major part of modern literature. Many people first took notice of them in 1986 when Art Spiegelman won the Pulitzer Prize for his *Maus*. When he was asked why the characters in *Maus* had empty oval eyes, he responded that he was a fan of *Little Orphan Annie* – a character with those kind of eyes. More recently, Spiegelman has published a graphic novel about 9/11 entitled *In the Shadow of No Towers*.

### A Historical Perspective

Here we are taking a chronological look at some artists who have incorporated humor, irony, parody, and/or satire into their works. Pieter Bruegel (c. 1525–1569) was a Flemish Renaissance artist who portrayed very different emotions in *The Seven Deadly Sins*, *The Blind Leading the Blind*, and *Children’s Games*. Giuseppe Arcimboldo (c. 1530–1593) was an Italian Renaissance symbolic artist with a sense of humor. His famous paintings of Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter are composed from the fruits, flowers, and vegetables appropriate to each of these four seasons. Arcimboldo’s four seasonal paintings can be compared to Antonio Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons” – “Spring,” “Summer,” “Fall,” and “Winter,” and to Northrop Frye’s literary observation in which he equates Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter to Romance, Comedy, Realism, and Tragedy.

William Hogarth (1697–1764) was an English painter and social critic who specialized in satiric paintings. His *A Rake’s Progress* (1731) was followed by his series of moral works including *A Harlot’s Progress*, six paintings called *Marriage à-la-Mode*, *Industry and Idleness*, and *Four Stages of Cruelty*. Hogarth liked to play with perspective. In one of his prints, a man and a woman appear to be fighting (or courting) on a precarious shelf, while another man, who is far from the river, appears to be fishing. Hogarth also liked to do artistic parodies. In 1752, Hogarth did an engraving entitled *Columbus Breaking an Egg*. The apocryphal story is that after Columbus had discovered the “new world,” several of his detractors had proclaimed that this feat was unremarkable, and that anyone could have done it. Columbus responded that anyone could do it now, because he (Columbus) had demonstrated how it had been done. As an illustration, he challenged anyone present at the meal to stand an

egg on its end. After many attempts, and many failures, Columbus crushed one end of an egg against the table. This allowed the egg to remain upright.

Edvard Munch (1863–1944) was a Norwegian painter and printmaker, whose most famous painting is named *The Scream*. More than a decade ago it was stolen, and pro-life activists used the occasion to force television studios to play an anti-abortion movie on television. They said if the movie was not shown, the painting would be destroyed. The painting was later recovered, but not from the anti-abortion activists. They were merely exploiting the name of the painting – *The Scream*.

Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) was the Spanish painter who developed the artistic genre of “Cubism” in order to make two-dimensional art appear to be three-dimensional. Picasso experimented with artistic displacement by putting eyes between the legs, or sex organs on the face. Picasso loved the concept of “contradiction.” In his own defense, he wrote, “Nature does many things the way I do, but she hides them! My painting is a series of cock-and-bull stories.” Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger* (1907) is a good example of his Cubist style, as is his *Guernica* (1937). *Guernica* is a depiction of the German bombing of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War. It is a large-canvas painting showing the inhumanity, brutality, and hopelessness of war. It is mentioned here, in a book about humor, to demonstrate an extreme example of the “Incongruity and Incongruity Resolution” theory of humor. Even during the ravages of war coupled with the distortions of a Cubist painter like Picasso, we are able to resolve the incongruities. We think this is a kind of gallows humor.

Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) was a French Dadaist and Surrealist artist. Duchamp’s *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919) is a parody portrait of the *Mona Lisa* with a mustache. Probably his most famous work is *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2* (1912). A close look at the painting reveals that there is no nude at all, but rather something that looks like multiple exposures of a shapely robot. It has been described as an “explosion in a shingle factory.” Here, Duchamp is clearly pulling a joke on us. He did this again when he took a porcelain public urinal, turned it around backwards, therefore transforming it into art. He gave this piece his artist’s signature, and the title of *Fountain*.

Marc Chagall (1887–1985) was a Russian–French Surreal and Cubist artist. Many of his works have a whimsical or dreamlike quality. His figures, often upside down or sideways, are distorted on his canvases in an arbitrary fashion that sometimes resembles a film montage. Chagall’s work has been described as a combination of Yiddish joke and Russian fairy tale. Chagall’s *Parents* looks something like characters in a Punch-and-Judy show. His surreal *Fiddler* (1912) was the inspiration for Jerry Brock and Sheldon Harnick’s 1964 Broadway Musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. His *To My Betrothed, I and the Village* and many of his other paintings are both Surreal and Cubist in their renderings. They remind viewers of Picasso’s paintings.

Joan Miró (1893–1983) was one of Spain's foremost exponents of surrealist fantasy. He painted in an aggressive but playful style even when using his work for social criticism. Miró's surreal sculptures can be seen throughout Spain and elsewhere, but his two most notable sculptures are *Dona i Ocell* (Woman and Bird) in Barcelona, Spain, and *Pájaro Lunar* (Lunar Bird) in Madrid, Spain.

René Magritte (1898–1968) was a Belgian artist who loved playing with the dislocation of space, time, and scale. In Magritte's *The Human Condition* there is the painting of a landscape in a window. This painting blurs the distinction between art and reality. Magritte also has a painting of an artist looking at an egg, while on his canvas he is painting a picture of a bird. In Magritte's *Attempting the Impossible*, he painted a picture of himself painting a nude. However, he was not painting a picture of the nude on a traditional canvas, but was rather using the brush to make the nude come into reality from empty space. In many of his movies, Walt Disney used this same artistic effect. In Magritte's *Golconda*, there are dozens of well-dressed middle-class men in bowler hats falling like rain toward the street, and in one of his paintings there is the trunk of a chopped-down tree with its roots covering the axe, apparently to keep the axe from doing any more damage. Probably Magritte's most famous painting is a pictorial representation of a pipe with the title, *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*. His point is that a pictorial representation of a pipe is really not a pipe – it is a picture of a pipe. Sometimes, we appear to be unaware of that important distinction.

M. C. Escher (1898–1972) was a Dutch artist who did lithographs of stairs that continue going up (and down) forever, waterfalls that function as their own sources, and foregrounds that turn into backgrounds and vice versa. Escher drew people walking up walls and on ceilings, hands drawing themselves, and objects leaving the paintings and entering the real world. His painted reptiles appear to crawl off the page and change into living creatures. Escher loved to play with changing shapes and colors. We've seen several of his paintings reproduced on T-shirts, which for the most part are sold to teenagers.

Spain's Salvador Dalí (1904–1989) liked to depict dream worlds in which commonplace objects were juxtaposed, deformed, or metamorphosed into bizarre and irrational distortions. Many Dalí paintings are reminiscent of his Catalanian homeland. One of his paintings shows a hill, some caves, some trees, and some people sitting in the sand, but if viewers turn their heads to look sideways at the picture, it suddenly becomes a painting of a woman's head. *The Sacrament of the Last Supper* (1955) is hung at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. There is a large picture window in the background of the painting showing the familiar landscape of Catalonia. His sculpture entitled *Rinoceronte Vestido con Puntillas* (1956) is in Marbella, Spain. The "Plaza de Dalí" in Madrid is decorated with many of his other sculptures. Dalí's most famous painting is *The Persistence of Memory* (1931). In this painting, limp, melting watches rest in an eerily calm landscape.

Probably the most important Expressionist artist is America's Jackson Pollock (1912–1956). Pollock expressed his emotions by dripping, spilling, hurling, splashing, and otherwise attacking the canvas with his paint. The parody Expressionist painter in the movie, *The Big Lebowski*, is Julianne Moore, who is strapped nude into a harness and swung over a huge canvas to create an expressionist painting. Many people in the general public suspect that Jackson Pollock was playing jokes on the artistic community, but he firmly denied it. But if he were playing a joke on the public, wouldn't he firmly deny it?

Roy Lichtenstein (1923–1997), like Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, and James Rosenquist, was often impressionistic to the point of pointillism, and also sometimes surrealistic to the point of Dadaism. Lichtenstein often reproduced comic-strip figures and images from romance magazines. He had his characters speak in balloons, and he used a metal screen as a stencil to produce a look imitating the dots from newsprint photos. The visual impact was increased by the way he outlined his brilliant, flat colors in black. Examples of Lichtenstein's mundane subjects and mundane titles include *Torpedo...Lost*, *Kiss II*, *Happy Tears*, *In the Car*, *Ohhh ... Alright, I Can See the Whole Room ... and There's Nobody in It*, *Sleeping Girl*, and *Woman with Flowered Hat*. While the names make the paintings sound mundane, the prices paid for these pieces of art are anything but mundane. These particular Lichtenstein paintings have brought prices ranging from 5.5 million dollars to 95.5 million dollars each.

George Segal (1924–2000) was another American pop artist. Segal made life-size bronze figures to be placed in settings where they might actually appear, for example at bus stops, sitting on benches in public parks, or standing on the platform of a train station. Sometimes when people aren't paying much attention to their surroundings, they might be startled to discover that they are sitting or standing next to one of these bronze figures – but of course, this is only going to happen when people are in “artsy” areas. In the late 1960s, Segal began painting some of his characters in vivid colors as joking metaphors for “a rosy disposition,” “a blue funk,” and a “black mood.”

Andy Warhol (1928–1987) once observed that “in the future, everyone will be famous for 15 minutes.” During the 1960s, Warhol surprised the art world with his worship of commercialization. Among his most famous silk-screened prints was one of Elvis Presley, and another one of a Campbell's soup can. Warhol was famous for being a celebrity and a social critic as much as for being an artist. In 1998, his “Orange Marilyn” (referring to the actress Marilyn Monroe) sold at a Sotheby's auction for 17.3 million dollars.

We were interested to see a *New York Times* story on May 26, 2013 about Brigham Young University's computer animation program. The story was entitled, “When Hollywood Wants Good Clean Fun, It Goes to Mormon Country.” Each member of this team, made up of college students majoring in art, had created a life-sized caricature of their own face for the group photo shoot. The plan was for all of them to hold their self-made caricature in front of their faces

as the photo was taken. But just as the camera clicked, one artist pulled his caricature aside to show his own face. We decided his action was a different type of photo bombing.

Here is one of our favorite stories about classical art:

A thief in Paris planned to steal some paintings from the Louvre. He stole the paintings and put them in his van, but his van ran out of gas. When asked how he could mastermind such a crime and then make such a stupid mistake, he replied:

I had no Monet  
To buy Degas  
To make the Van Gogh.  
I figured I had nothing Toulouse.  
... And I had De Gaulle to try it.

### Points of Departure

1. A National Museum of Cartoon Art was established in 1974. Its organization was headed by Mort Walker, the creator of *Beetle Bailey*. Its goal was to collect, preserve, and exhibit cartoons, comic strips, and animation. It was first located in Stamford, Connecticut, then in Port Chester, New York, and finally in Boca Raton, Florida. It included 200,000 original drawings, 20,000 comic books, and 1,000 hours of film and tape. In 2002, it was dissolved and merged with the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum affiliated with Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. There were many complications in the organization and preservation of the collection. It would be helpful if a small group of you could investigate the history of the Museum and its complications, and find out about the special collections at the University of Ohio. Come back and report your findings to the class, including what kind of research some of you might be able to undertake with the material now at Ohio State University. Also, try to figure out why it was so difficult to keep going with the original idea of a large museum.
2. Another project that could be handled by small teams or individuals would be to gather information about the William Randolph Hearst Cartoon Hall of Fame in 1997. As of 2017, these thirty-two inductees were chosen for the list by non-cartoonist authorities. Maybe each person in the class could choose one of the following cartoonists to research and report on:

Peter Arno (99 covers of *The New Yorker*)  
Carl Barks (Donald Duck and Scrooge McDuck)

Dik Browne (*Hagar the Horrible*)  
 Milton Caniff (*Terry and the Pirates*)  
 Al Capp (*L'il Abner*)  
 Roy Crane (*Washtub, Captain Easy, and Buz Sawyer*)  
 Billy DeBeck (*Barney Google*)  
 Rudolph Dirk (*Katzenjammer Kids*)  
 Walt Disney (*Snow White, Fantasia, Pinocchio, Dumbo, Bambi, Cinderella, and Mary Poppins*)  
 Will Eisner (*The Spirit*)  
 Budd Fisher (*Mutt and Jeff*)  
 Harold Foster (*Tarzan*)  
 Charles Dana Gibson (*The Gibson Girl*)  
 Rube Goldberg (*Rube Goldberg Machines*)  
 Chester Gould (*Dick Tracy*)  
 Harold Gray (*Little Orphan Annie*)  
 Cathy Guisewite (*Cathy*)  
 George Herriman (*Krazy Kat and Ignatz*)  
 Lynn Johnston (*For Better or Worse*)  
 Chuck Jones (*Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies, Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, Wile E. Coyote, Road Runner, Pepé le Pew, and Porky Pig*)  
 Walt Kelly (*Pogo*)  
 Winsor McCay (*Little Nemo in Slumberland*)  
 George McManus (*Bringing Up Father, and Maggie and Jiggs*)  
 Thomas Nast (*Santa Claus and GOP Elephant*)  
 Frederick Opper (*Happy Hooligan*)  
 Richard Outcault (*The Yellow Kid, and Buster Brown and Tige*)  
 Alex Raymond (*Flash Gordon*)  
 Charles Schulz (*Peanuts*)  
 Elzie Segar (*Popeye*)  
 Jimmy Sinnerton (*The Little Bears and Mr. Jack and Jimmy*)  
 Mort Walker (*Beetle Bailey*)  
 Chic Young (*Blondie and Dagwood*)

3. This is an assignment about visual imagery. Read the following explanation about Lewis Carroll's visual imagery, and then write a short essay, something like 200 words, about some place – real or imagined – that contains visual imagery. In fact, in your piece, try to bring in not only visual imagery, but as much other sensual imagery as possible – sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste. Today, we are “spoiled” with how easy it is to take and post real photographs, but our parents and grandparents weren't so lucky. They were like Lewis Carroll, who had to use words to create pictures in his readers' minds, as when Alice first saw the “White Rabbit with pink eyes”



run close by her. And even when it said to itself “Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!” it “all seemed quite natural.”

“But, when the Rabbit actually took a watch out of its waistcoat-pocket, and looked at it, and then hurried on, Alice started to her feet, for it flashed across her mind that she had never before seen a rabbit with either a waistcoat-pocket, or a watch to take out of it, and, burning with curiosity, she ran across the field after it, and was just in time to see it pop down a large rabbit-hole under the hedge.”

Of course, the image in our minds of the White Rabbit is probably helped by John Tenniel’s drawings, which most of us have probably seen. Lewis Carroll was very specific in requesting John Tenniel, an illustrator for the famous *Punch* satire magazine, as his illustrator.

Carroll went so far as to sketch some of the pictures he wanted Tenniel to draw, while others were described so well by Alice that we can see them in our mind’s eye. For example, at the Caucus Race, held mainly to get everyone dry after they had fallen into the “Pool of Tears,” the runners all crowd around the Dodo, who seems to be in charge, and demand to know “But who has won?”

The Dodo (an extinct bird) could not answer this question without a great deal of thought, and it stood for a long time with one finger pressed upon its forehead, while the rest waited in silence. At last the Dodo said, “Everybody has won, and all must have prizes.”

One of the things that’s fun about this description of the Dodo looking like Rodin’s *The Thinker* is that it fits with the illustration of the Philosoraptor meme, that you might have seen online, which shows a drawing of a comical, extinct velociraptor dinosaur, holding its large sickle-shaped claw on its second toe up to its chin as though to help it think of such clever messages as:

If camera lenses are round ...  
 ... How come pictures turn out to be rectangular? And  
 If I try to lose the game and succeed ...  
 ... Do I win the game?



### Management and Marketing

In this chapter, we are focusing on two kinds of humor in business. First, we are writing about the kinds of humor that good managers bring into their businesses as a way of encouraging employees to be happy and productive. This kind of humor serves as an antidote for people suffering from the loss of control that employees sometimes feel when they are working in a business that has a strict, top-down chain of command. This can easily happen not only in factories, but also in merchandising and in many different types of service organizations.

The second part of the chapter will be about the kind of humor that companies share with the general public as a way to build positive feelings between the companies and the people they hope to include as their customers or their guests. Part of the solution to such problems is just recognizing that there is a need for humor, and that it often takes little more than common sense and a willingness to open a company's doors to both kinds of humor. One example is the various "laws" that celebrities, authors, and ordinary people think of and then publish or put online. Some of the old classics include:

- Damon Runyan's law, "In all human affairs, the odds are always six to five against."
- Paul Herbig's Principle of Bureaucratic Tinkertoys, "If it can be understood, it's not yet finished."
- Murphy's Law, "If anything can go wrong, it will."
- To which O'Toole added "Murphy was an optimist."

Our favorite maker of such "laws" is the late Laurence Peter, who wrote three books including *The Peter Principle*; *The Peter Prescription: How to Be Creative, Confident, and Competent*; and *Why Things Go Wrong, Or, the Peter Principle Revisited*. The first time he was scheduled as a keynote speaker at one of our Humor Conferences, we received a frantic phone call saying that the hotel could not find his name on the reservation list. Don rushed down to the hotel and discovered that our guest speaker was listed as "Mr. Principle," with

the first name of “Peter.” We were all amused that Laurence Peter’s book had somehow managed to co-opt his name.

Peter’s most famous quote is that “All employees rise to their level of incompetence.” He came to that conclusion by observing that when people are doing well, they will most likely be promoted to the next higher level of responsibility. This often turns out to be at least slightly above the skills they have truly mastered. Others of his well-known observations are:

- The problem with temptation is that you might not get another chance.
- Speak when you are angry, and you’ll make the best speech you’ll ever regret.
- Some problems are so complex that you have to be highly intelligent and well informed just to be undecided about them.

By going online and looking under “Business Humor” and “Business Humor and Cartoons,” you can find many more of these succinct statements. While they can’t guarantee you success in life, they will probably make you smile.

John Morreall, a well-known professor at the College of William and Mary in Virginia, is a popular humor consultant, who is frequently called on to assist companies in making their employees happy. He, along with other consultants, suggests that the world of business would be a lot more fun, and more successful, if companies were less hierarchical and more democratic. He points to such businesses as Google and Southwest Airlines as companies which try to find ways to make their employees want to come to work. He points out that in such companies, the employees’ work spaces tend to be more informal and innovative; for example, there might be a slide or a pole to take workers from the second floor to the first floor, and you might even see employees who do a lot of delivery work wearing roller skates. Also, employees are encouraged to bring in such “comfort” items for their cubicles or offices as photos or toys, gadgets, and souvenirs. However, it is important to remember that the ideas for these kinds of “different” working environments need to come from the employees. Also, before boredom sets in, such practices need to be open to change, and, most importantly, people should not be forced into participating in customs that make them feel uncomfortable. For example, we recently saw a televised yoga class where a farmer brought five baby goats into a gymnasium, and gave the goats the freedom to walk around, sniff, nuzzle, and climb all over the human participants, who outnumbered the goats at least two to one. Both the goats and the people appeared to be having a wonderful time, but we imagined that at the exercise center there must have been two “Yoga Rooms,” one “with,” and one “without,” the helpful little goats.

The job of “Management” is to encourage employees to take more risks, and to expect that they will sometimes make mistakes. When workers are encouraged to experiment, and to smile and have fun, they are likely to carry these same attitudes into their contacts with customers and with other people they

are working with. We love the story about a police officer who was called by the neighbors to a home where a husband and wife were having a loud and potentially dangerous fight with each other. Just as the officer parked her car and got out to walk up to the door, a portable TV flew through the front window. When she rang the doorbell, an angry voice called out "Who's there?" She pondered for only a second, and then said "TV repair!"

Fortunately, the couple was so surprised that they were shocked out of their separate rages and both came to the door with sheepish grins. Of course the officer's response was not something she had been taught on the job, but obviously she had been encouraged to do quick thinking and adjust to a situation that was already filled with more than enough anger and hostility.

Another police story that Alleen likes, but that just makes Don shrug (probably because he hasn't mopped as many floors as Alleen has), is about an officer calling in to report that a woman had shot her husband because he walked across the kitchen floor that she had just mopped. The Police Chief asked the officer, first, if he had called an ambulance for the husband, and second if he had arrested the wife. The officer quickly gave a "Yes" answer to having called for an ambulance, but a "No!" to whether he had arrested the wife. His quick explanation was: "The floor is still wet!"

John Morreall and other humor scholars suggest that businesses would be a lot more fun and more successful if they were less hierarchical and more democratic. Morreall suggests that some modern businesses try to find ways to make their employees want to come to work by making the work-space more creative and innovative. There might be a slide or a pole as a way of getting from the second floor to the first floor, or workers might wear roller skates. Their offices are filled with toys, trinkets, and gadgets. Businesses which encourage humor also take more risks, and they don't worry as much about making mistakes. They encourage information to be as much bottom-up as top-down. No one minds if workers are a little noisy as they experiment and have fun while sharing ideas. In order to achieve these goals, businesses should flatten out the organization by reducing the levels of management, allowing the workers more discretion in making decisions, fostering creative thinking, accepting employee attitudes, emotions, and suggestions, and encouraging teamwork and collaboration. When Morreall did a survey of 737 CEOs, he found that 98 percent considered humor to be important in the conduct of business. In hiring, they therefore gave preference to people with a sense of humor, and looked for ways to measure the soft skills that usually predict success in management.

In interviewing prospective employees, the Director of Human Resources at Sun Microsystems watches to see how long it takes an interviewee to laugh or to find something amusing in what they are talking about. She says that humor is very important in their corporate future.

A twenty-page article published in Volume 30(1), of the 2017 issue of *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research*, entitled “Funny Business: Using Humor for Good in the Workplace,” explained some interesting concepts about the differences between the use of positive humor and the use of negative humor, i.e. that which is racist, sexist, or in some way makes fun of attributes that people cannot change. The authors were Abbie Caudill from the Department of Psychology at the University of Akron, and Julie Woodzicka, from the Department of Psychology at Washington and Lee University. They conducted a survey with 388 full-time employed adults, all living and working in the United States. Their ages ranged from 18 to 60 with 242 participants identified as male and 144 identified as female. There were two abstentions. From the total, 271 were coded as “professional,” while 117 were coded as “non-professional.”

Their goal with the study was to divide humor into positive and negative categories and then to figure out how to explain the relationships. Their results suggest that positive humor is a potentially powerful workplace tool for increasing well-being because of the way it impacts social support. However, the unusual finding of their study was that fellow workers are “turned off” by the use of hostile humor, even if the person is using self-deprecating humor. The researchers suggest that more research is needed to discover just why self-deprecating humor is a “turn-off” to co-workers. Is it because the individual may be perceived as shy or low on self-esteem? Or perhaps people feel uncomfortable for “siding with” a joke-teller who is insulting the company they both work for.

Their final suggestion was that employers need to recognize that social support can be a helpful tool for increasing and maintaining well-being. Managers need to help their employees “grasp” the concept because it will be a win-win situation for both companies and the people who work at all levels in the company. One suggestion they made was that company managers integrate humor training into diversity training. For example, all employees of a company need to realize that disparaging sexist and racist humor is inappropriate in the workplace. And on the positive side they need to talk about and give examples of the kinds of jokes that enhance relationships because they are bringing people together as they make observations about shared interests.

We recently heard about a business that vowed to make itself a more “fun” place to work, and so they decided to create a “Grouch Patrol.” They “authorized” anyone seeing a fellow employee with a sour expression, to stand in front of the person and make a “bat-face” by pushing the tip of their noses up, flicking their tongues in and out, and making a high-pitched “Eeeeeeeeeeeeeee” sound. Of course such a practice would last only as long as people found it funny, and, in fact, it might have a negative impact on new employees. Rather than helping them relax and truly enjoy their job, it could make them extremely

nervous about what other “surprises” these “weird” people have in store. It could even bring long-term disadvantages if people who weren’t in on the original decision perceive that the emphasis in their new company is more on the “appearance of enjoyment” rather than on “true enjoyment.”

A better example of humor at work is this business letter that was written by a collection agency. We doubt it was really sent out, but at least the people in the office got to enjoy the humor of the closing two lines. “We appreciate your business, but, please, give us a break. Your account is ten months overdue. This means we’ve carried you longer than your mother did.”

A chief element of humor is surprise, so it is best not to carry on with the same old jokes for weeks or months. If someone makes a mistake, it would be a good idea for the person to think of a timely and humorous way of apologizing. We know one business manager who, after instituting a practice that didn’t work out, brought to work a T-shirt with a large red bull’s-eye on it. He knew people would want to talk about how his idea had gone wrong, and so just before the office meeting, he pulled the bull’s-eye T-shirt on over his regular clothes. This act was his kind of apology and it gave the people at the meeting permission to discuss what had gone wrong.

We’ve also heard about an IBM sales team that improved their sales record by 30 percent when they formed a little pick-up orchestra so there could be the blowing of a horn and the smashing of a gong as people reported their sales records for the week. Of course, it also helped that someone brought in home-made brownies for the event. But even this was a short-term activity that didn’t become a weekly chore.

Our niece told us about how her husband’s boss was always telling his employees to “get on with their work.” The phrase he used was “Don’t let the grass grow under your feet!” So when he went on a three-week trip, the office workers conspired to buy a roll of real grass sod and to roll it out in his office. When he arrived back at work he was greeted with “See, grass grows under your feet too!”

Another relative told us about how her company gave their twelve outstanding employees a pleasure trip on a cruise to Mexico. From someone who had gone on the cruise the year before, she heard that on the cruise ship there was probably going to be a competition in which each team (three people) would decorate the door to their cabin. Before the trip, she took photographs of herself and the two other members of her team to a photo shop and had them superimpose the facial photos onto pictures of jungle animals. She tucked the pictures into her suitcase, along with a roll of non-damaging tape, some green wrapping paper, and a cover from the famous children’s book *Where the Wild Things Are*. Of course her team won, even though the other employees on the trip good-naturedly accused them of “cheating” because of having had professional help from the photo shop.

Bulletin boards for cartoons or jokes can be set up by the coffee machine or at some other gathering place such as elevators. Alleen's sister recently moved to a retirement home where, three times a day, she has to walk down a long hall to get to the elevator that will take her to the dining room. Of course she complained about this, but then she brightened up by telling us that every single day, someone posts a new joke for people to read while they wait for the elevator.

There is plenty of humor exploring such business-related themes as downsizing, heavy work-loads, micromanagement, humiliatingly small cubicles, the accelerating pace of change, corporate gobbledygook, management fads, cruel bosses, annoying colleagues, and red tape. But most of us don't want to let ourselves get mired down in such pessimism. It's enough for us to watch either the British or the American television shows of *The Office*. These shows satirize many of the frustrations that inevitably go along with employment, and they let us know that some of the frustrations people experience at work are unavoidable. A management expert at Apple Computer remarked that, "There are only two kinds of companies – those that recognize that they're just like *Dilbert*, and those that don't know it yet." The *Dilbert* he was referring to is the cartoon character created by Scott Adams. His "Dilbert" cartoons explore a wide variety of negative experiences. Our local newspaper prints it not with the other cartoons and comic strips, but instead in a prominent place on the "Business" page.

Once humor is accepted by the employers and employees in various businesses, it feels natural to extend humor to their customers and potential customers. Long ago, Volkswagen introduced the VW Rabbit into the US market with a ten-second commercial showing two rabbits looking into the camera, with one saying, "In 1956 there were only two VWs in America ...". As in this case, the most effective advertising is succinct, but it often opens people's minds to give them a new perspective. Our minds are also filled with persuasive messages that we have absorbed through continuous repetition. For example, we all know the beer that made Milwaukee famous is *Schlitz*, the soap that stops BO is *Lifebuoy*, the cereal that goes "Snap, crackle and pop" is *Rice Krispies*, the coffee that is good to the last drop is *Maxwell House*, and the salt that pours when it rains is *Morton*. People who say that they don't pay much attention to ads, and that they aren't affected by them, need to be reminded of what Joseph Goebbels said about propaganda in Nazi Germany: "Those who are to be persuaded should be completely immersed in the ideas of the propaganda, without ever noticing that they are being immersed in it." This is where humor comes into advertising. If we are amused or laughing at a commercial or a program, our defenses are down, which makes us that much more likely to be influenced by an advertisement.

The lives of business owners are shaped by the humor created and enjoyed by their employees as well as by the humor that owners and workers create as

advertisements for their products. Sometimes the same humor works for both employees and customers. For example, a friend who lives in Wallingford, in the state of Washington, sent us several photographs of a sign that gets changed once a week and that is located near her home. The sign is made with all black capital letters on a white background. From the photos, it looks to be something like five feet wide and four feet high. Underneath the sign was a smaller grey board with smaller white letters saying “WallingfordSigns.com.” We assumed that a company named “WallingfordSigns” created the clever signs and then sold their service to other small businesses. But when we looked up WallingfordSigns online, we discovered that they were all at one business. It used to be an auto repair shop, but in October of 2005, the owner sold his repair shop and remodeled the space, turning it into an *ExtraMile* convenience store. He explained:

Suddenly we had a problem. It had always been easy to think of useful messages to put on our outdoor sign for things like service promotions and store specials and the like. But with the *ExtraMile*, there were no more cars to fix and the place was plastered with store specials. So we decided to do something different.

He built the high-quality sign board and installed it at eye level on the corner of his business, facing out to the busiest street. It has space for four lines of large, black type, with each line holding a maximum of seventeen letters. The letters are made from heavy-duty plastic and are easy to change because they fit snugly into the pre-designed rows. A clear, see-through door is easy to open – at least for the employee who has the key and is awarded the privilege of putting up the week’s new joke. The jokes are changed every seven days, and both employees and customers look forward to “What’s coming!” There are always things at a convenience store that people can use in their daily lives. The sign board slows people down just enough that they are reminded of this fact. The joke of the week is often the first thing that customers mention when they come in – some with suggestions for a future joke. Here are a few examples:

<b>FROG PARKING</b>	<b>WHAT HAPPENS IF</b>	<b>IS THERE EVER</b>
<b>ONLY</b>	<b>YOU GET SCARED</b>	<b>A DAY THAT</b>
<b>ALL OTHERS</b>	<b>HALF TO DEATH</b>	<b>MATTRESSES</b>
<b>WILL BE TOAD</b>	<b>TWICE?</b>	<b>ARE NOT ON SALE?</b>

An extra funny sign was the one that had to be scrunched over to the left side, because the right side of the basic sign had apparently been hit by a car.

**THANKS  
FOR MAKING  
OUR SIGN  
A HIT**



### Today's World of Marketing

When we were children, it never occurred to us to think on an international level, but today because of television and the Internet we take it for granted that we are connected all around the world. And even if we aren't going to see every creative advertisement in person, if it is clever enough it will be posted on the Internet so we can all enjoy the humor. One of our favorite photographs is of a large ship resting in what looks like a European harbor. Clearly visible is a tangle of thick rope that appears to be in place to keep the ship from floating out to sea. The humor in the picture comes from the fact that one strand of the rope goes into a hole drilled about two-thirds of the way up on the side of the ship. Realistically painted around this hole is the face of a bald-headed man with lowered eyes and his mouth firmly puckered around the rope so that it looks as if he is slurping up a huge piece of spaghetti. The colorful message painted to the side of him reads "MONDOPASTO – So good you can't let go."

The look on his face was one of pure enjoyment, but in a different picture of a bald-headed man painted on the left side of a smooth panel below the back window of a city bus, the man does not have a "happy" face. His mouth is puckered around what is painted to look like a cigarette, but is actually the bus's exhaust pipe. This makes it so that when the bus takes off, clouds of smoke and exhaust fumes swirl up in front of the man's face. The message printed on the right side is the simple question: "Ready to quit?" We suspect that the artists chose to paint bald-headed men so as to cut down on clutter and make it easier for viewers to focus on the men's mouths, which in each case is where the humor occurs.

In every class where we have shown these two different "billboards," the students have laughed out loud. But when we showed another international advertisement which was based on a famous photograph taken by Joe Rosenthal on the Japanese beach of Iwo Jima near the end of World War II, our students were not at all amused. The photo was of six United States Marines struggling to drag a heavy flag pole across the sand and then to stand it upright on a stony outcropping which separated the beach from the mainland. The exhausted soldiers had just been through one of the most brutal battles of the war. In the years since World War II, this photograph has become almost sacred. But in the newly photo-shopped version, instead of the American flag being at the top of the pole, there was the yellow and red marquee and the "golden arches" of a McDonald's restaurant. None of our students thought this was funny, a reaction which must have been shared by other viewers because the picture soon disappeared.

However, there was a different kind of advertising for McDonald's restaurants that everyone seemed to approve of, even if they did not laugh. It was in a downtown center where tall poles were set along the sidewalk with the upper



ends arching out so that the light would shine down onto the sidewalk. But for this particular pole, a talented sculptor had topped it off with a large, graceful coffee pot tipped sideways so that the pole looked to be a stream of coffee pouring into a larger-than-life McDonald's coffee cup. This was not as funny as was the man's face painted on the side of the ship or on the back of the bus, but it nevertheless brought smiles.

People all over the world seem to love seeing actual items somehow turned into something else. The simplest one we've seen is a basket of eggs with a homemade sign reading "Boneless Chicken 35¢." The most complicated international picture we have seen looks as if it is in a German city. It is a picture of two conjoined buses. The actual joining is covered with a pleated kind of flexible plastic that looks to be about five feet across and slightly taller than the body of the buses. On each side of the pleated panel are large metal panels with one painted to look like the keys of an accordion, while the other looks like the harmony panel. Large, male hands are also painted on as if they are actually playing the "accordion." Apparently the only thing being advertised was the buses themselves.

### **Humor to Relieve Tensions**

While we have already said that some kinds of negative humor, i.e. the kind that is racist or sexist, have no place in the world of work, there are some kinds of negative humor that help to bring people together. Sort of in the same way that Sigmund Freud used jokes, along with dreams and fantasies, as "windows to the mind" through which he could learn what his patients were really thinking, in today's world we can use ordinary puns as windows to the mind of a culture or of a group of people. We first began thinking about puns with a "tendency" when we attended a Humor Conference in Ireland. It had rained five out of the seven days we were there and was still raining on the last day when we got to the airport. We were standing outdoors under a covered walkway in an *AerLingus* line at the Cork airport. While we were getting only slightly wet, we could see our luggage on carts sitting out on the runway, dripping and shining from all the water the suitcases had already soaked up.

While we were pondering whether there was anything we could do about the matter, we heard a nearby passenger speaking sardonically about "good old *Air Fungus*." We laughed because on a wet and rainy morning the pun had "tendency" and it reminded us of similar puns. We told her how when we lived in Afghanistan we had flown on Ariana Airlines, which all of us "foreigners" called *Scariana* with "three frights a week." A woman standing nearby was from Australia and she told us that in her country a well-known slogan is "Chance it with *Ansett*," which is the name of an Australian commuter airline.

We thought of taking out a pad and pencil and asking everyone in the line if they had any negative names for their own airlines, but by then our line had started moving and thankfully two men had come out in the rain and started loading our luggage onto the plane. So we waited until we got home, and then we made a nuisance of ourselves by asking our students and our friends whether they knew alternate names for the airlines they had flown on. Here's a list of what we collected.

Air France	Air Chance
Airwest	Airworst
Avianca (Columbian Airlines)	Avinunca, which means "no bird"
BOAC (British Overseas Airline Company)	Bring Over American Cash
BWIA (British West Indies Airline)	But Will It Arrive
CAAC (Chinese Airlines)	Chinese Airplanes Always Crash
Delta	Don't Even Leave the Airport
Great Lakes	Great Shakes
Northwest	Northworst
TWA	The Worst Airline, To Wait Always, Try Walking Across, Teenie Weenie Airline, T'aint Worth the Airfare
US Air	Unscheduled Air

Except for TWA, all of the airlines in this list were still in operation when we wrote this chapter. We wondered if the fact that TWA had five different negative nicknames, as compared to only one for the other airlines had anything to do with the fact that it ceased operations in 2001. We aren't actually drawing any such conclusion, but we do suspect that these negative sounding names are one way that passengers release their tensions when they are flying. And certainly there are tensions associated with flying as shown by the incident in April 2017, when a doctor who was travelling from Chicago, Illinois to Louisville, Kentucky was forcibly dragged down the aisle of an airplane by unsympathetic airline employees, who wanted him to give up his reserved seat so that one of the airline's employees could use the seat. The fact that passengers on the plane were horrified at the action and took and posted cell phone photos brought the whole issue of passenger dissatisfaction out into the open. On June 11, 2017 the *New York Times* devoted more than two full pages to an account of all the problems and frustrations that one of their reporters had when she spent nearly a week travelling across the United States.

### Points of Departure

1. Here are some insightful one-liners about business. As you discuss them, you may want to discuss what inspired the statements and which ones seem to be gender-marked:
  - A woman's place is in the mall.
  - But I can't be overdrawn! I still have some checks.
  - He who dies with the most toys wins.
  - I'm spending my grandchildren's inheritance.
  - Nouveau riche is better than no riche at all.
  - People who say money can't buy happiness don't know where to shop.
  - Shop 'til you drop.
  - When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping.
2. Here are the beginnings of some old jokes that fall into a pattern that you might be familiar with. As you read each of these beginnings, look at the list of endings and add the one that turns the sentence into a playful "joke." For example, with number one, the complete sentence about the muffler factory should be, "I tried working in a muffler factory, but it was too exhausting."

### Beginnings

1. I tried working in a MUFFLER factory, but ...
2. I once tried being a TAILOR, but I wasn't ...
3. So I got a job at STARBUCKS, but ...
4. Then, I moved next door to a DELI, but ...
5. So I applied to go to a school for CHEFS, because ...
6. Finally, I moved to California and got a job with a POOL maintenance company, but ...
7. I went to the beach and became a FISHERMAN, but ...
8. So finally I applied to MEDICAL SCHOOL, but I was turned down because they predicted ...

### Endings

- A. ... I wouldn't have enough PATIENCE
- B. ... it was too DRAINING.
- C. ... CUT OUT for such a SEW-SEW job.
- D. ... any way I sliced it, I couldn't CUT THE MUSTARD.

- E. ... I hoped it would add SPICE TO MY LIFE, but I couldn't find the THYME.
- F. ... I just couldn't live on my NET INCOME.
- G. ... I soon got tired of the same old GRIND.
- H. ... it was too EXHAUSTING.

**Answers:** 1=H, 2=C, 3=G, 4=D, 5=E, 6=B, 7=F, 8=A.

3. As a joke, someone once said that there are only two rules of business:

RULE NUMBER 1: The boss is always right.

RULE NUMBER 2: If the boss is wrong, see Rule Number 1.

But this is more than a joke. It's also a reality. With your classmates, discuss how pervasive this rule is in the real world, and discuss some of the ways that people try to make it less true.

## 5 Computer Science

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In *The Third Wave* (1980), Alvin Toffler points out that in the rural United States, Henry Ford's introduction of the assembly line in 1913 had profound consequences. Before this invention, many rural families lived on farms and ranches, basically isolated from other families except on Sundays, when everyone would meet in the town chapel to attend church. Before the assembly line, such families were pretty much self-sufficient. They killed and dressed their own hogs, made their own soap, sewed their own clothes, and lived the life described in Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie*. But the assembly line changed all of that. Because it required people to come to work at 8 am and go home at 5 pm, cities began to have rush-hour traffic, overcrowded freeways, and road rage. To keep the factories running, managers also invented the "second shift," and even the "graveyard shift." For Alvin Toffler, the farmers and ranchers were in the "First Wave," and the assembly line workers were in the "Second Wave."

The assembly line still exists in the digital world, which is called the "Third Wave," but in the digital world we are more concerned with the management of words and less concerned with the management of actual things. We depend on words and ideas that can be communicated over wires or through wireless devices; or even through the "Cloud." Since these words and ideas can be sent and received anywhere on the planet, you would think that rush-hour traffic, and freeways, and cars would be a thing of the past. But when a percentage of the population goes from one wave to the next, there are always members of the group who stay in the earlier wave. That's why we have iconoclasts and saboteurs. The word "saboteur" comes from the French word for a wooden shoe – a "sabot." The first saboteurs would throw their sabots into the newly invented machines, thus stopping the machines from working so that the workers could go back into the machineless world where they felt more comfortable.

Before computers, the world was a very different place. The world we lived in was a world of Zen Buddhism, with people constantly balancing the yin and the yang. In the United States, we had three television stations to choose from (ABC, NBC, and CBS). We had three magazines to choose from (*Life*, *Look*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*). We had three cars to choose from

(Ford, Chevrolet, and Dodge). These different choices were not offensive, so we could learn about a range of ideologies. But today in the digital age we tend to choose the television, newspaper, or magazine that reinforces the views that we already hold.

In his *The Act of Creation* (1964), Arthur Koestler says that there are three types of creativity, and that they all relate to incongruity and incongruity resolution. He calls the first type “Artistic Originality,” the second type “Scientific Discovery,” and the third type “Comic Inspiration.” Koestler’s “Artistic Originality” is discussed in our chapter on “Art and Humor.” All three types of creativity result in epiphanies, which are variously named “the bisociative click!” “the Eureka cry!” or in German, “Das aha Erlebnis!”

However, Koestler noted that these types of creativity are not the same, and neither are the responses to the different types of creativity. For Koestler the response to “Artistic Originality” is “Ah!” It is an aesthetic response not only to the realization that art and real-world objects are related, but to all of the ways in which they are related. When incongruities between art and real objects are suddenly resolved, the participants have an aesthetic epiphany. For Koestler the response to “Scientific Discovery” is “Ah Ha!” which is the Eureka cry. Not only is the incongruity resolved, but there is a realization of how this resolution can be applied to future inventions. Through the years, scientists observed that the ocean tides were in some way connected to the position of the Sun and the Moon relative to the Earth. They also connected a number of other observations including the fact that the needles on compasses point North. They discovered that rubbing a cloth on amber will cause the amber to attract things. They discovered the North Pole and lodestones and electricity and they invented electro-magnetic engines and many other things, including reverse engineering which enables us to change water energy into electricity. So the scientific “Ah Ha!” is not only observing something in the present that has been going on in the past; it is also a way of predicting the future.

As opposed to the artistic “Ah!” and the scientific “Ah Ha!” there is the comic “Ha Ha!” Koestler calls this “Comic Inspiration,” and it occurs whenever the clash between the real and the imagined is so great that it is incongruous, incompatible, satiric, ironic, paradoxical, ludicrous, or ridiculous. These last two words are related to the word “laughable.” As an example, consider the invention of the steamboat. In 1807, in order to demonstrate his new invention, Robert Fulton invited people to Albany, New York to take a trip up the Hudson River on a steamboat. People called this event “Fulton’s Folly” because everybody knew that it was impossible for the steam coming off from boiling water to propel a boat upstream. Such an idea was ludicrous; it was ridiculous; it was laughable; but it nevertheless happened, and it couldn’t have happened in the real world unless it had happened before that in Fulton’s mind. Likewise, cell phones, and wireless communication, and voyages through the universe have to happen in people’s

minds – in science fiction – before they can happen in the real world – in science. Traveling to other galaxies is ridiculous ... or maybe not?

As new concepts emerge, we recycle old words and phrases, often from fantasy and science fiction as in these examples:

Godzillagram	a huge packet
Munchkins	teenage techies
Wabbit	a mischievous program
Sorcerer's Apprentice Mode	an indefinitely repeating program
42	the meaning of life, the universe, and everything
Trojan Horse	a program infiltrating a computer
UTSL	Use the Source Luke (from <i>Star Wars</i> ) – used by someone who is asked a question on the Internet that could easily be answered by the questioner searching online.
Obi-Wan-Code	Off by One Code as demonstrated by the name HAL. The letters in the name HAL are really referring to IBM in Arthur C. Clark's 2001, <i>A Space Odyssey</i> . When you look at the alphabet, each of the letters of HAL comes just one space before the letters of IBM.
Tree Killers	paper wasters from J. R. R. Tolkien's <i>Lord of the Rings</i>
Code Police or Net Police	thought police from George Orwell's dystopian novel, <i>Nineteen Eighty-four</i> .

Changes in society, religion, and technology cause anxieties that inspire new movements. *Frankenstein* became popular when scientists began experimenting with real bodies. In the 1800s, American "Tall Tales" were humorous extensions of the strange things that people really did find as they moved West. And in the 1970s, urban legends made fun of people facing new and scary technologies including microwave ovens, organ transplants, and a lack of privacy. People who look like Zombies (half-alive and half-dead) appear in imagined stories and movies that are inspired by medical advances that have made it possible for people to live – or half-live – much longer. A professor from our College of Law recently gave a presentation on the differing criteria in different states related to the legal issues about when someone can be declared dead. Some States rely on whether the heart is still beating, while the laws in other States will allow the turning off of all machinery if the person is judged to be "brain-dead."

The jokes and memes that Millennials share with each other demonstrate the tremendous impact that science and technology has had on everyday lives. When an accident occurs, do people reach first for their camera or do they rush

in to offer medical support. This is the question asked in a meme that shows a camel in a zoo stretching its neck over the fence so it can wrap its lips around the head of a child. The question under the drawing reads: “A camel is eating your child! Do you run for the camel or for your camera?”

Even though memes are exaggerated, many of them nevertheless reveal simple truths. One meme shows a picture of an astronaut with the caption, “Went to the moon – took 5 photos.” This is followed by a picture of a young woman with the caption, “Went to the bathroom – took 37 photos.” This meme points out the disconnect that often results between how important an event is and how the event may be documented. A father says to his son, “Kids today don’t know how easy they have it. When I was young, I had to walk over 9 feet through shag pile carpet to change the TV channel.” Or consider the lady who says to a salesman, “I want to buy a computer that does what I *want* it to do, not what I *tell* it to do.”

There is also the meme of a person holding up a radio, a TV, a telephone, a camera, and a record player. The caption reads, “20 years later and all of these things fit in your pocket.” But cell phones can cause problems. Consider the following dialogue:

“Hi babe, what are you doing?”

“Nothing much. I’m really tired. Just going to sleep now, babe. And you?”

“In the club standing behind you.”

The above cell-phone dialogue was intentional, but technology can also unintentionally cause problems, and many of these problems happen when the computer is trying to guess what you want it to do, but makes the wrong guess. Here is a dialogue problem caused by Spellcheck:

“Your mom and I are going to divorce next month.”

“What??? Why! Call me please?”

“I wrote ‘Disney’ and this phone changed it. We are going to *Disney*.”

There is even a poem, written by Anonymous, that has been circulated widely on the Internet:

I have a spelling checker.  
It came with my PC.  
It plane lee marks four my revue  
Miss Steaks aye can knot sea.

Common spell-check mistakes include: “Untied States,” “Worth nothing that,” and “Fraud” for “Freud.”

Sometimes on Facebook, it becomes more than a dialogue. Each new respondent must go one step further than the earlier respondents, as in:

DAN: “Jesus loves me, this I know.”

LEVI: “For the Bible tells me so.”



MILO: "If he hollers, let him go."

CASEY: "And Bingo was his name-o."

Texting allows us to escape from the mundane life around us, to increase our social networking and to transcend trivial matters. But this is not always a good thing. There are memes showing people texting at important sports events, or texting people who are at the other end of their dining table, or texting a friend who has accompanied them to an art gallery, or worst of all, texting while driving. Obviously it's a bad idea for the driver of a car to try escaping from the moment by having fun with friends in cyberspace.

One of the advantages of digital communication is that we can hide our identities, or establish new identities. Peter Steiner drew a 1993 cartoon in *The New Yorker* showing two dogs in front of a computer. One is remarking, "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog." Even Steiner was amazed at how popular this cartoon became, as it not only reflected, but helped shape, world-wide attitudes.

Memes can also give us a new perspective on history. When the movie *Lincoln* was released, a meme was circulated that read, "Lincoln is doing well in theaters," and then added, "Historically, this has not been true." Philip Frye from *Futurama* has many memes attributed to him. One of them reads, "Not sure if failing at winning – Or Winning at Failing." There are also Philosoraptor Memes (named after Velociraptor dinosaurs). One reads, "I just read that last year 4,153,237 people got married – I don't wanna start any trouble or something, but shouldn't that be an even number?"

The digital age has made things so easy that we have had to invent things to make them harder. It is commonly believed that the QWERTYUIOP keyboard on typewriters was invented in order to slow down the typist and keep the keys from jamming. Actually, only the second part of this belief is true. QWERTYUIOP was invented not to slow down the typist but rather to speed up the keyboard by keeping the keys from jamming. When typewriters were first invented, the letters that were used most often frequently jammed together, so the QWERTYUIOP keyboard was designed to separate these letters from each other. Nevertheless, today, when something is designed to slow us down rather than speed us up, the design is said to be following the QWERTYUIOP principle.

Admittedly one of the problems of computers is that they're sometimes "too fast," and thus they fail the "Turing Test." Computer programs are sometimes designed to fool people into thinking that they are communicating with a human being when in fact they are communicating with only a computer. The Turing Test is designed to make people at the initiating end of communication think that they have made contact with another human. If the response comes back too fast, it will reveal itself as computer-generated. Another thing that

would make a computer fail is “real-world knowledge.” The following sentences are ambiguous. A computer would have difficulty understanding these ambiguities because of its lack of real-world knowledge:

A cheesecake was on the table. It was delicious and was soon eaten.  
 Newspaper Ad: Our bikinis are exciting; they are simply the tops.  
 It's time to make smoking history!

Still another problem with computers is that they are too democratic. Everybody wants to get into the act. People want to create and post their own material – to large groups of people. What goes out on the Internet has probably not had an editor, a director, or a producer. This results in originality and spontaneity, but it also results in questionable materials being put online.

The digital age now allows us to take “Selfies,” so it’s possible to take a selfie with a celebrity at an event like the Oscars. It’s also possible to take a selfie during a dangerous event like the “Running of the Bulls” in Spain, or the “Tour de France” bicycle race. And of course something similar to the selfie is the photo bomb, where an observer sees a picture being taken and intrudes into the picture. There are also “photo bombs” in which dogs, cats, squirrels, or other animals enter the scene at the exact moment that a picture is being taken.

*Pinterest* is an application that operates a software system designed to discover information on the World Wide Web. It is described by Ben Silbermann, Pinterest CEO, as a “catalog of ideas” rather than a social network. He says that it inspires users to “go out and do it.” One Pinterest Haiku reads:

Five syllables here  
 Seven more syllables there  
 Are you happy now??

*Tumblr* is an application that is partly social networking and partly microblogging. Messages found on Tumblr include list-jokes, puns, parody, sarcasm, and call-and-response. *Vine* is an application that allows users to take and post short video clips. In contrast, the tellers of verbal jokes have the luxury of taking their time in order to provide the information needed to understand the joke. This is especially true in a shaggy dog story. In contrast, *Vines* are limited to seven seconds, so they require careful cutting and editing. They also require the use of stereotypes, so that the information can be presented quickly. Editorial cartoons also follow the seven-second rule for the same reasons.

*Twitter Tweets* and *Retweets* are digital messages that used to be limited to 140 characters. But toward the end of 2017, the limit was doubled so that people could send messages of 280 characters, thus enabling people to tweet more easily and more often. A contributing factor to the change was that the United States President Donald Trump, a prolific user of Twitter, wanted to send messages out to the general public that were longer than 140 characters. In order to

do this, he would divide his longer messages into two parts with the first part having three ellipses dots at the end, and the second part having three ellipses dots at the beginning. This could be confusing because some people would see only one or the other of the messages.

Still, many Americans complain about getting such messages from the President because they fear that some of the messages are not written by the President himself. Also, they preferred the “old days” when people had more confidence in messages from the President because they knew such messages had gone through different levels of Presidential helpers and so had been “officially” agreed upon.

Some people have been fired from their jobs because of the tweeting of inappropriate humor. In October of 2013, White House staffer Jofi Joseph was fired for posting “snarky” and mean-spirited tweets under the handle of @natsecwonk. These tweets were a mix of leaking sensitive national security information, criticizing the White House policies, and insulting the personalities and appearances of national security officials. In his own “apology” or maybe “defense,” Joseph called it a “parody account,” and said he was only “saying what everyone else...thought.”

People who remembered Peter Steiner’s *New Yorker* cartoon caption about people not knowing if you’re a dog on the Internet inspired a new caption for the joke. “If you’re a dog on the Internet, someone will find out.”

### How the Digital Age Is Changing Humor

No one knows exactly when people on earth first laughed, but most scholars agree that these three characteristics are what separate humans from animals:

- Homo Erectus (We stand and walk upright)
- Homo Sapiens (We think in complex ways)
- Homo Ridens (We laugh in response to intellectual stimuli).

Within fairly recent history, humans have seen several real-life developments that have made humor and laughter increasingly important parts of daily life. These include better and less expensive printing presses which resulted in a greater percentage of the population having books, magazines, and newspapers to read. At the same time, people had wider access to radio and television programs, a wider variety of films, and more kinds of cameras and recording equipment. All of these successes contributed to the building and commercialization of theaters for both movies and live performances; night clubs where comedians provide the entertainment; and auditoriums, field houses, and stadiums for even larger gatherings where humor is integrated into such main events as athletic competitions, musical concerts, political campaigns, scholarly lectures, and such light-hearted events as fairs and festivals.

### Social Media

While not all social media focuses on humor, much of it does even though sometimes the humor is unintentional, and sometimes what a sender views as funny turns out to be insulting or offensive to some of the receivers. One of the problems is that social media is so all-inclusive and it is so new that people, even in the same family, have not yet come to agreement about its use. Parents live in fear of their children being “seduced” into doing things that are unsafe, or at least unwise, or of being “bullied” by other kids at school. We were surprised that our college students worried about their younger brothers and sisters because they did not yet understand the negative consequences that might befall them.

### Retrospective Humor

Computers give new life to old jokes because it’s now possible to collect examples of jokes or of events that by themselves were only moderately funny, but when they are collected as a set, take on a new life because they have “tendency” and fit with the definition of “exaggeration” which in itself is one of the marks of humor. We call this “retrospective” humor, which is possible only because of the way that today’s digital media can preserve recordings of key moments in world history or in the lives of people in the news.

In public life, such recordings can be gathered and re-broadcast to larger audiences than actually saw the original event. Such sets of images – sometimes with words, but sometimes just with pictures – can be used for serious purposes, as when someone wants to bring attention in a negative way to what politicians promised when they were running for office as compared to what they provided after they were elected. This kind of “real” historical evidence provides fodder for clever comedians, while even not-so-clever comedians can get big laughs when they gather evidence to show that even the rich and famous make mistakes. For example, almost a decade after George W. Bush was President of the United States, searchers can still find online collections under such titles as *Bushisms* or *Bush Language Errors*, as when he stated “They underestimated me” and “Rarely is the question asked ‘Is our children learning?’”

Hosts of late-night news and comedy shows do not even need to go back in history further than a few weeks or months to get laughs by showing a public figure pretending to present a brand-new speech to several different audiences.

A more positive example of retrospective humor showed ten photos of a smiling Queen Elizabeth posing alongside ten American Presidents. On page 1, she is standing next to President Barack Obama, then on p. 2 next to George W. Bush, and so on through Presidents Bill Clinton, George H. W. Bush, Ronald Reagan, Jimmy Carter, Gerald Ford, Richard Nixon, John F. Kennedy, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and Harry Truman. The website was entitled, “The Stability of

Kingdoms and Queendoms,” while the personal message from the woman who forwarded it to us read, “I don’t know about you, but I went OMG somewhere between Eisenhower and Truman.” Then she added a P. S. “If you remember all or most of these Presidents, you’re no spring chicken either!”

For Americans, the humor came from the sudden insight that maybe “our way” is not automatically the only – or the best – way to manage governance, while for British viewers the humor could probably be described as Superiority humor because of the way Queen Elizabeth looked so regal and in control over a period of sixty-plus years.

### International Humor

Another example of benign international humor made available on the Internet is a set of photographs of climbing trails set throughout the world. The pictures ranged from the *Elbsandsteingebirge Stairs* in Switzerland to the *Wurzburg* trail in Germany, and from the *Columbia Crack of Guatape* in *Anioguia* to the *China-Scale Worm Tailhang* mountains between the *Shanxi* and *Lenan* provinces in China. Any one of the pictures would have been “interesting,” but when they were put together, they were awe-inspiring. As a set, they seemed extremely exaggerated, i.e. “over the top.” When we showed the slides to a group of senior citizens, everyone laughed while one woman proudly promised to pass it on to her local “hiking group.” This got an even bigger laugh, but there were a couple of people in the group who let us know that they had seen one or more of these locations from a comfortable seat in a tourist bus.

In our first ASU humor class, one of our biggest show-and-tell laughs came from a selfie supposedly sent that morning by an American father who was on a business trip to Tokyo. The son, who had posted the photo, explained that he had received it from his Dad that morning. He had asked his Dad to send a picture from his hotel window to show the family what it was like to be in a big Japanese city. We were charmed by the photo of a fatherly looking man in a high-rise hotel room, holding a camera at arm’s length so he could take a selfie while standing with his back to a large picture window. As we looked a little closer, we broke out laughing because there at the side of the window was the head of the famous Japanese Godzilla monster getting ready to push through the window. Our clever student had simply found this picture online and then personalized it to make it genuinely funny.

We experienced several other good examples of international humor in November of 2015 when the Emeritus College at Arizona State University decided to join in the world-wide celebration of the 150th anniversary of the publication of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Don sent a note to members of the International Society for Humor Studies, asking for comments or examples of the continuing influence of *Alice*. Here are some of the items that people forwarded us through email:

From Germany, we received a serious Internet article about health and safety regulations. The attention-grabber for the article was “Der verrückte Hutmacher,” i.e. “The Mad Hatter,” who in the Alice story is brain-damaged by working with the poisonous chemicals used in hat-making. In the 1800s in England, hat-makers used mercury during the felting process, and this is what made the hatter actually go “mad.” The same man told us that in Germany, Tweedledum and Tweedledee are referred to as *Zwiddeldum und Zwiddledei*, while Humpty Dumpty is called *Goggelmoggel*, which is also the name for a dessert made with beaten eggs and sugar.

### Humor as Self-Defense

In spite of the fact that today we have lots more humor available to us, we experience varying degrees of frustration about the newness and the complications involved in managing the digital equipment that we have purchased or that has been assigned to us as part of our employment. This has resulted in a new kind of humor in which our frustrations are relieved by seeing that we share our insecurities with others. For example, a Randy Glasbergen cartoon shows a cruel boss torturing an employee who was hanging from the ceiling. The employer is asking his victim:

How shall I torture you today? Boiling oil? The rack? Tech support?

Of course all of us are grateful for whatever help we can get in learning how to manage our computers, but we nevertheless are likely to feel uncomfortable when someone we don’t know is talking to us on the telephone and we feel inadequate when we can’t understand what they are telling us to do. Jokes like the one above are comforting, even if not really helpful.

On the other hand, we feel “smart” when we catch onto something like the “list joke” below. It is such a popular joke that by now it is almost trite, nevertheless it makes people smile.

Only a few years ago

A *keyboard* was a piano.

A *web* was a spider’s home.

A *virus* was the flu.

A *CD* was a bank account.

A *hard drive* was a long trip on the road.

A *mouse pad* was where a mouse lived.

And if you had a  $3\frac{1}{2}$  *inch floppy* – you just hoped nobody found out.

We like the joke because it is such a good example of how, when there is a need for new words, speakers are more likely to adapt words that are already in their language and to give them additional meanings, than to invent new sound

combinations as has been done by computer engineers who have their own ways of “teaching” technical terms to their colleagues, while the rest of us are happy to just go along with the metaphorical uses of words we already know. Because technology is changing so rapidly, the punchline of the above joke is already an anachronism, and will soon be obsolete.

### Cooperative Humor

Another reason for including this joke is that it is the kind of joke which was probably created by more than one person. Such “list jokes” set up a pattern and almost invite readers to add one or more examples of their own before forwarding the joke to others. For example, when we first received the “Sad Obituary for the Pillsbury Doughboy” (which you can probably find online), we added our own phrase of “Dosey Do” (taken from a “Square Dancing” call) to the names of Dough Boy’s survivors, which included his wife, Play Dough, and his two children, Jane Doe and John Doe. Now we feel a special kinship to this particular “story.”

One of the ways that we know people make their own contributions to forwarded jokes is that many people who know we are interested in humor send us basically the same joke with small differences in the wording. And since people do not tell us where or when the joke was sent to them, we have no way of knowing which of the versions might be “the original.”

### Laughing at Digital Media

Some of the jokes we have received are simply making fun of how fast we are all adapting our behavior and expectations to new aspects of digital media. For example, our students brought in a cartoon labeled “SENIOR CELL PHONE.” It showed a man who had just flipped his phone open to reveal a circular dial. The other cartoon was set in what looked like a museum where two personified, smart phones were walking down a hall and looking up at a portrait of an old-fashioned dial phone. The speaker part of the dial phone was lifted off so that the curly cord connecting the hand-held part to the body of the old-fashioned phone sitting on a shelf was clearly visible. The larger of the cellphones was explaining to the smaller one, “THAT’S RIGHT DEAR, OUR ANCESTORS HAD TAILS.”

*TIME* magazine writer Richard Stengel described the cell phone as “a super extension of ourselves – faster, brainier, and more reliable.” Besides being used for calling people, cell phones enable us to look for things on the Internet, listen to music, take and send photos, and communicate through text messages. Someone pinned on our class bulletin board a full-page magazine photo of a befuddled, old-fashioned looking “techie” who was weighed down by wearing



a head-set and holding a boom box on one shoulder. On the other shoulder, he had propped a large camera and also hung the receiver from an old-fashioned telephone. Sitting on a desk and on a couple of little side tables in front of him were some twenty other digital devices including a CD, an old-fashioned Sony tape recorder, a computer, a keyboard, and more than a dozen other devices in various stages of unwrapping. The caption read “20 years later and all of these things fit in your pocket.”

At a National Council of Teachers of English meeting, Lois Duncan, an author who since the 1970s has written popular mystery books for teens and children, talked about the changes that cell phones brought to her writing. In 1971, she wrote a book for children called *Hotel for Dogs*. In 2008, it was made into a popular film for kids, which inspired her publishers to design and market new editions of several of her other kids’ mystery stories. She was instructed to “update” the clothing, the hairstyles, and most importantly, to provide the characters with computers, cell phones, and digital cameras.

She was amazed at how challenging this was because many of her suspenseful situations were caused by the fact that her “endangered” characters could not make contact with the outside world. Now she had to find ways to disable her characters’ cell phones so they couldn’t send texts, tweets, or email. The hardest part was to figure out different and believable ways for batteries to go dead or for her characters to drop their cell phones into rivers or toilets.

Probably the most amusing aspect of digital media is the Auto-Correct function on both our computers and our cell phones. How Auto-Correct works is that when writers are sending messages, if they misspell a word, the “computer brain” looks around to find a “similar” word that will fit into the grammatical structure of the sentence. The computer then “guesses” that this must be the intended word and puts it in, with the results being sometimes “tragic” and sometimes funny. Examples that our students brought to class included a girl texting her friend that her grandmother was in a hospital, seriously ill. She ended with something like, “The doctor thinks she will get better.” Her friend responded with “I hope she dies.”

Because “I hope she does” isn’t technically a complete sentence, the Auto-Correct function changed *does* to *dies*, and so of course the girl called her friend in person and demanded to know why she had sent such a dreadful message as “I hope she dies!” Fortunately, the two friends figured out what had happened and had a laugh about it. There are several websites that report on these kinds of mistake under such names as *autocorrectfail*, and *awkward parent texts*.

### New Ways to Watch Humor on “TV”

ASU student Kory Johnson, a political science major in our first digital humor class, explained to us that becoming a college student brings a number of changes



to daily life. For some this is the first time they are living on their own, while for others it means living in a different city, meeting new people, and making new friends. One thing that it almost universally means is a change in lifestyle. College students have to come to grips with paying for tuition and books and a place to live. This means that they are forced to spend as little money as possible on other things. One of the first things they choose to do without is cable or satellite television. While network television programming may be available via antenna or the Internet, much of the programming that college students had grown accustomed to watching in their family’s home becomes unavailable – at least through legal and inexpensive means. Luckily, there is now a growing industry in Internet-exclusive shows that can make up for the loss in traditional television programming, especially in humorous comedic shows.

The Internet with its funny videos of parodies, cats, pranks, and things that go wrong has plenty of humorous potential. However, such shows usually stand alone with each viewing being an independent event, but this is rapidly changing. There are now Internet-exclusive “shows” that are similar to those that viewers find with cable or satellite subscription; however, they are not as long as the traditional thirty-minute or hour-long shows on network television. But even shows that are three to ten minutes long incorporate many of the same techniques and topics. Good sources include [funnyordie.com](http://funnyordie.com) (pronounced “Funny or Die”), [collegehumor.com](http://collegehumor.com), and [youtube.com](http://youtube.com). Because these shows are directed at college-age students and because viewers have to choose to log into them, they are not controlled by the regulations of the FCC (Federal Communications Commission) and so include more vulgar and sexual content than is found on mainstream television.

Kory wrote that while the websites post traditional conceptions of humorous Internet videos, they also provide videos that are part of a larger series. Noteworthy examples include “Drunk History” and “Between Two Ferns with Zach Galifianakis,” both on [funnyordie.com](http://funnyordie.com), the “Jake and Amir” and “Hardly Working” series from [collegehumor.com](http://collegehumor.com), and the “How It Should Have Ended,” “Dragonball Z Abridged,” and several others on [youtube.com](http://youtube.com), which Kory thinks is ground zero for the development of this new type of humor series.

He says that most of the shows fall into one of the following categories: vlogs (video blogs), host interviews, cartoons, sitcoms, or shows that blend together two or more of these different elements. While the majority of the shows are video blogs, another trend is for the show to be features on their own “channels” alongside other series created by the same individual or group, just as they would be if they were on television. Some of these Internet-exclusive shows are receiving so many viewers that they are becoming mainstream, to the point that their hosts are branching off into more traditional media while famous individuals from traditional forms of media are now making appearances on the shows.

### Points of Departure

1. Here is a sampling of important dates in the history of humor. Some are related to technology, while others are related to new ideas about humor. Look at the list and by brainstorming with a few of your classmates, see if you can list one or more fairly recent bits of humor that we probably would not have had without one of these particular breakthroughs:

1876: First telephone

1889: Eastman Kodak camera company

1905: First nickelodeon (a place where people could pay money to see primitive films)

1928: Walt Disney produced the first Mickey Mouse film

1948: First cable TV

1969: Internet established

1989: *The Simpsons* debuted on television and became the longest-running TV sitcom

1991: World's first website was posted

1993: First smartphone.

2. View an Internet-exclusive show for yourself and take notes so that you can come back ready to share at least two observations or predictions about the future of such shows and whether they are following – or leading the way in – the development of televised humor.
3. Write your own “digital media” autobiography. Tell how old you were when you received your first piece of digital equipment. What was it? If you have younger brothers or sisters, compare your experience to theirs. If you don't have little kids in your family, try to talk to a neighbor or the mother of a child so you can compare your own experience of “Growing Up With Digital Media” to that of someone a decade younger than you are.
4. You might watch for news accounts of humor-gone-wrong on social media in your own community.

## 6 Education and Children's Literature

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After the two of us retired from thirty-eight years of teaching in the English Department at Arizona State University, we were invited to team-teach a one-semester class entitled "Humor across the Disciplines" to twenty-two upper division students in Barrett: The Honors College at ASU. Throughout our careers, we had used humor in our teaching and had been active in the International Society for Humor Studies, which developed out of six April Fools' Day national humor conferences (the last one was international) that with help from the Arizona Humanities Council we had hosted on our campus back in the 1980s.

However, this was the first time we had been officially assigned to "teach" a semester-long class focusing on humor, and we were excited at the prospect of team-teaching and of working with students from a variety of majors. Because of the word *Humor* in the title, the class quickly filled to its capacity of twenty-two students, and we were launched on a new career. We were thrilled that it was enough of a success that the English Department and ASU's Project Humanities invited us to repeat the class the next year for English Department credit, and since then we have been teaching sections of the class to senior citizens in various programs sponsored not only by ASU's Emeritus College, but also by both Mesa and Chandler/Gilbert Community Colleges and other organizations created for the enjoyment of the many retirees who have chosen to live in Arizona because of its warm winter weather. The people who choose to fly "home" when summer comes are jocularly referred to as "snowbirds," but many others have decided to live here year-round and to extend their education through taking classes with other senior citizens.

This textbook has been influenced by these recent teaching experiences, added on top of the over thirty-five years that we both taught at Arizona State University in Tempe. Don helped organize the Linguistics program at ASU, and in his early years worked extensively with the teaching of English as a Foreign Language, while Alleen first taught in the College of Education and then later in the English Department where she managed the English Education program with its cadre of student teachers who worked in high schools throughout the Phoenix metropolitan area.

We have prepared this textbook mainly for instructors of college classes being taught either in English Departments or in communication-related classes throughout various academic disciplines. We have tried to include materials that will be helpful in all disciplines, as well as for advanced students of English as a Foreign Language, because using and understanding humor is usually the last skill that non-native speakers develop. Don earned his Ph.D. in Linguistics at the University of Michigan where both of us worked with international students, and spent a two-year internship at the University of Kabul in pre-war Afghanistan. After we returned home from Afghanistan, Alleen earned her Ph.D. in English Education at the University of Iowa. We came to ASU in 1973, where for thirty-eight years we taught a variety of classes, but our favorites were always the ones that included aspects of humor, as in Don's linguistics classes and in Alleen's classes in Children's and Young Adult Literature.

While teachers often say that they have learned more from their students than the students learned from them, in our case it has been absolutely true because the students taught us not only concrete information, but also how attitudes differ across generations. Of course we knew that 20-year-olds would know more about computers and digital media than we knew, but we were naïve to think that all of the students would know the same things. We were surprised in the minutes before class at how we regularly saw them showing each other new programs or explaining how to manage something on the class equipment.

When one of the students was talking enthusiastically about something he saw on Reddit, he casually asked, "How many of you use Reddit?" Only one-third of the class nodded their heads, which inspired the Reddit fan to immediately launch into a big sales talk for the program. Nobody objected, but neither did they rush to sign up. Something similar happened when one enthusiastic student set up a Facebook page just for our class members; only fourteen out of the twenty-two students chose to participate. And when after two or three weeks in class, we allowed the students to pick their own topics for their research projects (a PowerPoint which they would present to the class, while writing up the same information as a research paper for the teachers) it was no problem for them to find twenty-two unique topics.

Years ago when we taught in the English Department, students would drop into their seats before class and open up ASU's newspaper, the *State Press* (which was affectionately called the *Stale Mess*). When it was time to start class, we would say something like, "Heads-up – *State Press* down." But in our recent humor class, we never saw a student reading the *State Press*, even though it was still provided free on news-stands around the campus. And in an effort to attract readers, the student newspaper (which had been the second largest newspaper in the State of Arizona) had been changed from black and white newsprint to full color and to a format that looked more like a magazine

than a newspaper. Nevertheless, in the spring semester after our class, we all received an online announcement saying that from now on the *State Press* was going to be digital only.

The main difference for us as teachers is that when our students were reading the school paper, we sort of knew what they were reading and could allude to the day's cartoon or to the most exciting news or the most intriguing observation made by a columnist. This gave us common ground, which we no longer had at the beginning of class because when students are focusing on their cell phones, probably no two of them are looking at the same thing.

We hadn't given much thought to this until the first day of our humor class. We were surprised as we watched the students open up their backpacks and unload one or more pieces of digital equipment, ranging in size from card-sized cell phones to full-size laptops. When we were teaching in the English Department, students had been advised to keep their digital equipment tucked away, and if someone with special needs had to have a computer to take notes, they were advised to sit in the back row so that their screen wouldn't distract other students.

One of Don's first lectures was on transcendent stories, those that involve going from one state of being to another, and how these changes usually occur in high places such as on a tower or a mountaintop. His examples ranged from Rapunzel letting her hair down from the tower where the witch had imprisoned her, to Jack climbing up the Beanstalk. As Don was getting into more advanced examples, he mentioned *Jacob's Ladder* from the Bible. The words were no sooner out of his mouth, than a student with a large-screen laptop held it up so everyone could see that he had found William Blake's painting of *Jacob's Ladder*.

For this particular lecture, the illustration really was worth a thousand words, and we, of course, took a positive approach to such immediacy. Our classroom was arranged so that we teachers sat side-by-side with the students, but across from each other. All of us were at the same level and everyone could see everyone else's face, which sent a message of student democracy and empowerment, while encouraging discussion more than lecturing. A large white screen was hung on the west end of the room, while in one corner of the room a computer and a projector, alongside a document camera, sat on a raised projection stand. These were placed for easy access by either the teachers or the students, which provided us with endless opportunities for studying enlarged examples of digital humor, as well as of humor clipped from magazines and newspapers. We could even lay small items on the camera platform so that we could look closely at brand names and analyze the symbols imprinted on the packaging of commercial products.

We invited our students to participate in an informal kind of "Show and Tell" for the first five or ten minutes of our seventy-five-minute class, which met

twice a week. Whoever found an especially interesting piece of humor, either online or clipped from a newspaper or magazine, could come in and set it up for all of us to view on the big screen. We did most of our teaching through PowerPoints that we had made, but still it was obvious that the students knew that we were way behind them in understanding the intricacies of computers, and so they would sometimes tease us.

One day when we arrived in class, a meme was already on the screen which was so funny that it earned our BLT (Best Laugh Today) honor. It was a portrait of a professor who looked a lot like Don maybe twenty years ago. The lettering at the top read "HAS A MASTER'S DEGREE AND A PH.D." while the message below the photo read, "TAKES THE WHOLE PERIOD TO TURN ON THE COMPUTER."

The class found this so funny that Alleen defensively said, "That's not nice to laugh at old professors like us." A voice came from somewhere in the room, "We're not laughing at you – YOU'RE smart enough to ask US to turn on the computers!" This, of course, elicited a new round of laughter, including from us.

A similar incident happened a couple of months later when we arrived in class the morning after a national election and one of the students had posted a meme that read:

IT TAKES AMERICA ONE NIGHT TO COUNT MILLIONS OF VOTES, BUT IT TAKES OUR PROFESSORS THREE WEEKS TO RUN A SCANTRON.

We laughed, right along with the students, at the timeliness of the joke. We didn't feel targeted because in our old-fashioned way, we never gave multiple-choice tests that could be machine-graded. We gave grades mostly on the students' in-class presentations, e.g. on panel discussions and on the success of their PowerPoints. For the midterm and the final exam, we asked for short-answer essays.

### **Age Differences: Teachers vs. Students**

As soon as we knew we were going to be teaching the class, Alleen started gathering editorials, news stories, cartoons, advertisements, and other clippings that in some way related to humor in the news. During the first week, she brought these clippings to class and spread them on the tables for students to peruse. She had also purchased (we had a budget for such things) loose-leaf notebooks for the students with the idea that they could use these binders for keeping their class notes, along with whatever interesting photos, cartoons, and clippings they would find. The notebooks were covered with plastic so that students could insert their favorite clippings and photos to make interesting covers.

Alleen passed hers around as an example. She had put a couple of funny family photos on the cover, along with a framed statement from Yogi Berra: "Go

to Other People's Funerals, Or They Won't Come to Yours!" The students totally ignored this joke, but they smiled and commented on a meme showing Adolph Hitler with his straight-arm salute and Winston Churchill with his V for Victory sign. The caption read "Scissors Beat Paper." They noticed and laughed – probably because of the incongruity of the simplicity of the old game of "Rock, Paper, Scissors" being compared to the complexities of World War II.

Alleen's purpose in bringing in the clippings was to inspire students to read the news and watch for interesting topics for their research projects. In keeping with this, she encouraged them to take whichever clippings they found interesting. At the end of the class period when the students left, we discovered that very few had taken any of the clippings. At first we thought they were shy or simply hadn't understood the idea of making a scrap book of "Humor in the News," and then we decided that they simply weren't accustomed to looking at print items and so mostly ignored what we had brought.

Alleen's fattest folder of jokes had been filled with obituaries about the fairly recent deaths of such celebrities as Andy Rooney, Phyllis Diller, Nora Ephron, Mike Wallace, Andy Griffith, Helen Gurley Brown, and Bill Keane. She had been hoping to entice one of the students into making a comparison between the obituaries of "funny" and "serious" people because we had often noticed that obituary writers seemed to be on the alert to find something light-hearted or humorous to serve as a balance to the sadness of death. Her thesis was that the obituaries for humorous celebrities would be longer than the obituaries for ordinary people. The longest article in her folder of clippings had been an extended Associated Press story about a quirky obituary that had gone viral on Facebook and Twitter as people sent excerpts to their friends, but even this one was left behind.

We finally concluded that while people in their seventies are, of course, interested in reading obituaries, people in their twenties are not. But then a few weeks later we had to rethink the matter because in the weeks leading up to the one-year anniversary of Steve Jobs' death, which had occurred on October 5, 2011, the media began to carry jokes and cartoons that over the intervening year had been polished and now could be viewed more easily as humor. Several students brought in examples, and the whole class especially appreciated this witticism: "Ten years ago the USA had Steve Jobs, Bob Hope, and Johnny Cash... Now there's no Jobs, no Hope, and no Cash!" They also laughed at a David Fitzsimmons drawing from the *Arizona Daily Star*. Steve Jobs – complete with halo and wings – was holding a harp and asking: "When is the last time this device was upgraded? It really needs to be more user-friendly. Who's in charge of innovation up here? Is this available in other colors?"

Another favorite showed Jobs, dressed in his typical jeans and black turtleneck, talking to an older angel dressed in a white robe. The student who



presented it to the class referred to the angel figure as the “God-Dude.” He was bringing Jobs to meet Moses – who was still carrying the Ten Commandments – one stone under each arm. The “God-Dude” was saying to Moses, “Meet Steve. He’s gonna upgrade your tablets...”

The students were surprised when we explained that obituary cartoons are usually prepared way ahead of time because as soon as a celebrity shows some signs of illness or just plain old age, cartoonists go to work on an obituary cartoon. A cartoonist who spoke at one of our humor conferences told us that obituary cartoons are favorites with readers. He also said that newspapers nearly always get letters of appreciation for them – probably because they help to bring closure, along with a smile, to sad situations.

However, cartoonists seldom feel good about drawing obituary cartoons because they have trained themselves to look at opposing sides of an issue and to take a “different” point of view. There aren’t that many angles from which to view death because deep in our subconscious most of us are frightened of death and so we reverently go along with the adage of not speaking ill of the dead. This means that when “honoring” someone who has died, cartoonists have to rein in their inclinations toward hostile wit, unless they are joking about someone like Adolph Hitler.

### Humor across the Generations

It’s really hard to predict just who will like a particular joke – especially if all we are looking at is the age of the listeners. This was brought home to us when we showed a poster entitled “Texting for Seniors” to both our college students and to a class of senior citizens. Both groups laughed, but at different parts.

FYI	Found Your Insulin
BFF	Best Friend’s Funeral
BYOT	Bring Your Own Teeth
LOL	Living on Lipitor
BTW	Bring the Wheelchair
ROTFL ... CGU	Rolling on the Floor Laughing ... Can’t Get Up

The college students laughed the most at the last one, but our senior citizens laughed the most at “Living on Lipitor.” We decided that to find something funny, people need to have some acquaintance with the underlying meaning. And obviously, senior citizens know more about Lipitor (a statin medicine to help reduce high cholesterol), while college students know more about “rolling on the floor laughing.” The surprise for them was the incongruity of such a fun-filled action being followed by such a discouraging situation as being unable to get up.



We often experienced “junior/senior moments” and had to backtrack and rearrange our thinking, and occasionally it was the students who had to rearrange their thinking. One of our “finds” from the *Arizona Republic*’s “This Date in History” was a photograph of Carnegie Mellon University professor Scott Fahlmah, who on September 19, 1982, had proposed punctuating humorously intended computer messages by employing a colon followed by a hyphen and a parenthesis to communicate a horizontal smiley face. Our computers won’t let us type this old-fashioned way of signaling that something is funny, but instead changed it into the more typical smiling face – ☺.

The students were amazed that the smiley face emoticon had been invented more than a decade before they were born. They apparently thought that emoticons were their own generation’s invention. To support this view, one student pulled out her iPhone and showed how she had downloaded an app which provided her with something like twenty different emoticons that she could make from regular keyboard symbols.

Another student told us that her grandmother had been a secretary and so was proud of the fact that she still remembered her shorthand. So now her text messages are a combination of shorthand and whatever symbols she has been able to pick up. The girl laughingly explained that she always has to phone her grandmother to find out what she was trying to say, “but I think that’s the whole point. She just wants to talk to me!”

### **The Values of Humor in Education**

Nearly all of the experienced teachers and principals that we know agree that a happy teacher is better at helping children enjoy going to school. And part of a teacher’s happiness relates to how happy his or her students are. This is why most programs in teacher preparation include a class either in Children’s or in Young Adult Literature, and also why such classes put a big emphasis on the reading and sharing of humorous books.

John Morreall, a humor expert who teaches at the College of William and Mary, says that humor can foster analytic, critical, and divergent-thinking skills. It can also get and hold students’ attention, increase their retention of learned material, relieve stress, and build rapport between teachers and students. Humor also helps to build team spirit among classmates by smoothing out potentially rough interactions. Finally, humor can promote risk-taking and get shy and slow students more involved in class activities. In his *Humor in the Classroom*, author Fred Stopsky discusses the ways that humor can promote critical thinking skills. Three activities that he suggests are having students design a “Wanted” poster for really bad guys in history, research ludicrous laws or famously mistaken predictions, and discuss the intended meanings of unusual song lyrics.

In their 1994 *Lighten Up: Survival Skills for People Under Pressure*, C. W. Metcalf and Roma Felible give three suggestions: (1) See the absurdity in difficult situations, (2) Take yourself lightly while taking your work seriously, and (3) Develop your sense of joy and being alive. Their most concrete suggestion was for people to visit a photo booth and take several pictures of their own outlandishly distorted faces. They should keep the photos handy and when a major problem arises, they can take out the photos, and think, "You are not just the problem you're having; you're this too."

Professor James Gordon of Brigham Young University says that "when students are having fun, the class time virtually flies by, and the 60 minutes of class seem like a mere 48." Sometimes he tells his students that the day's topic is so boring that it fits Mark Twain's description of "chloroform in print." Then he walks out the door and comes back a few minutes later in a simple disguise.

Junior High School teacher Bill Haggart discovered that children are really creative in thinking of excuses for being late or absent, so he decided he could be creative along with his students. On his class bulletin board he set up three categories: "Helpless," "Hopeless" and "Not in Control of the Body." He told his students they had to bring in written excuses and then he would have them post their excuses on one of the three bulletin boards. Students had fun with the exercise, and at the same time, it cut down on absences.

Exaggeration is one of the features that can be found in much of the literature written for children or teenagers. Alison Lurie suggests in her 1990 *Don't Tell the Grown-Ups: The Subversive Power of Children's Literature* that in some ways children are more able to handle difficult social issues than are adults. Lurie suggests that one reason why children love A. A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* is that they identify with Christopher Robin, who gets to be an all-powerful, beneficent dictator, or at least the parent figure, for Eeyore, Kanga, Baby Roo, Owl, Piglet, Pooh, Rabbit, and Tigger. One of Judy Blume's strengths in such books as *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret*, and *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* is the witty dialogue of her characters. A book such as Judith Viorst's *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* makes readers laugh at Alexander's frustrations while at the same time lending reassurance that people do survive bad days.

British scholar Walter Redfern, in his 1984 book, *Puns*, says that children play with words much as they play with toys. He says that without this kind of wordplay, they would lack practice in the art of thinking – the most complex and powerful survival tool that humans have. The puns and double meanings in nursery rhymes and nonsense verse get children ready for the double meanings of words in the eleven *Amelia Bedelia* books by Peggy Parish. Amelia is a housemaid who takes everything literally. When she is told to "put out the lights," she hangs the light bulbs on the clothes line. When she is told to "dress the chicken," she puts ruffles and a skirt on it. When she is told to "draw the drapes," she gets out a sketch pad and makes a picture.

Children also love riddles and parodies of riddles. For example, a girl is locked up in a room that is empty except for a piano, a wooden table, a saw, and a baseball bat. The door is locked and there are no windows. How does she get out? This riddle has multiple answers:

1. She breaks out with the chicken pox;
2. Or she uses the saw to cut the table in half; since two halves make a whole, she crawls out through the hole;
3. Or she plays the piano until she finds the right key; then she uses the key to unlock the door and let herself out;
4. Or she runs around the room until she wears herself out,
5. Or she swings the baseball bat three times; it was three strikes, and she was out.

### Children's Television

Emmy Awards were first given in 1949 for television aimed at viewers under the age of 12. And from the very beginning, more than 50 percent of the programs being honored were designed as being both humorous and educational. They also had both adult and child audiences in mind because the sponsors were, of course, interested in selling products. The earliest shows included *Time for Beany*, which was later adapted into the *Beany and Cecil* cartoons. In the late 1960s, the National Educational Television (NET) was changed to PBS, which won two Emmy awards for *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*. By the 1990s, PBS was regularly receiving honors for its preschool program, *Sesame Street*. Local television stations also sponsored participation shows in which local children (often called "the peanut gallery") would apply to participate with the adult leaders, who were helped with scripts and ideas from the national networks.

These shows varied in style and content. They had such names as *The Howdy Doody Show*, *Captain Kangaroo*, *The Shari Lewis Show*, *The Mickey Mouse Club*, *The Musketeers*, *Bozo the Clown*, *Soupy Sales*, and Pee-Wee Herman's *Pee-Wee's Playhouse*. These early shows set up the divisions we still have in which shows are basically divided into three age groups: toddler and pre-schoolers, young school-aged children from ages five through eight, and finally programs for older children from ages nine through eleven. There aren't as many locally produced shows as there used to be. Alleen still smiles about one of the *Romper Room* shows where the teacher read the children a simplified account of A. A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh*. The teacher apparently had never heard or read the story and she referred to the donkey as *Eyesore* instead of *Eeyore*. When a little boy asked her why she called him *Eyesore*, she shrugged and said "I guess he had sore eyes." Alleen was tempted to write to the television station to invite the teacher to come and take a class in "Children's Literature."

One of the most interesting bits of recent research related to children's literature is what is called the Excitation-Transfer Theory. Professor Dolf Zillman

from the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa is the person who has worked the most with this theory in relation to children's literature. The idea of the theory is that the excitation-transfer is not limited to a single emotion. For example, when watching a movie, a viewer may be angered by seeing the hero wronged by the villain, and this initial excitation may intensify the viewer's pleasure in later witnessing the villain's punishment. This makes logical sense and is probably something that all of us have experienced. However, Zillman's theory is that the second emotional experience is a residual excitement, sort of left over from the first stimulus. People's minds and bodies still have the adrenalin and other chemicals that resulted from the first experience, even though the person does not realize that he or she is still emotionally affected.

However, the individual's feeling of excitement, which is an unrecognized leftover from the original excitement, may still influence the reader (or listener in the case of children) to feel an enhanced level of interest, as when teachers read a story every day after lunch. The Excitation-Transfer Theory is based heavily on psychology, psychophysiology, and biochemistry, but it can also be applied to children and the media that they see and hear. If you go online, and look under the heading "Excitation-Transfer Theory" or under the name of Dolf Zillman, you can find more information about this intriguing theory, which sheds light on one of the oldest challenges we face, which is figuring out why children sometimes enjoy reading and/or hearing a particular story and why there is such variety in the books that become popular.

### Children's Literature

We first started encouraging students to bring in clippings, cartoons, and jokes when Alleen taught a class in "Symbols and Archetypes in Children's Literature." The allusions were easy to find because advertisers, broadcasters, cartoonists, journalists, politicians, bloggers, and whoever else wants to communicate with large numbers of people will often allude to children's literature. They use it as a reference point because in our increasingly diverse culture, memories of "classic" children's books may be one of the few things we have in common. Students began referring to these allusions as "comfort food for grown-ups" because they remind adults of "the good old days" when they were children being taken care of by loving adults who would read them to sleep or share picture books before turning off the light with a cheery "Good night! Sleep tight! Don't let the bed bugs bite!"

Nursery rhymes and folk tales are an especially rich source for allusions because they present a full array of exaggerated personalities including *Chicken Little* to represent alarmists, *The Big Bad Wolf* to warn us of danger, *Humpty Dumpty* to point out how easy it is to fall from grace, *The Frog Prince* to give hope to discouraged women of all ages, and *Pinocchio*'s ever-growing nose,

along with the old rhyme about “Liar, liar. Pants on fire!” to accuse people of lying. The best children’s picture books usually contain something bad or scary, but within their allotted thirty-two pages, the scary part changes into a happy ending. One such story is Robert McCloskey’s *Make Way for Ducklings* (Viking, 1941), where listeners hold their collective breaths and then sigh happily when the mother duck and her ducklings make it safely across the street and into the Boston Commons and Public Gardens. Even in a dry state like Arizona, we have public parks with duck ponds and on nearby streets, city officials have put up silhouetted signs, based on the illustrations in the book, of a mother duckling proudly crossing the street with her ducklings walking behind her.

A recent news story by Tom Jackson in the *Washington Post* reported on an event that at least for the Canadian geese (playing the role of McCloskey’s ducklings) had the same happy ending. However, it wasn’t so happy for 60-year-old Joseph Vamosi, who got out of his car and stopped traffic on the Fairfax County Parkway so that a dozen Canadian geese could march across four lanes of highway. He told the judge they were very dignified – sort of like the famous picture of the Beatles crossing Abbey Road – but he was nevertheless fined for obstructing traffic. Reporter Jackson surmised that *Make Way for Ducklings* must have fallen off the reading list in Fairfax County.

Another feel-good book, Robert Lawson and Munro Leaf’s 1936 *Ferdinand*, played a role in the 2009 hit movie, which told the story of how a well-off Tuohey family adopted Michael Oher, a “tough” little kid whose mother did not have the resources to take care of him. Michael went to the same school as the Tuohey children, and in the film the adoptive mother was played by Sandra Bullock. She notices his needs and sets out to adopt him. Even before Michael gets totally moved into his new bedroom, Bullock finds the story of *Ferdinand* and they all read it together. It is a classic story about a Spanish bull who when he is brought to the bull ring in Madrid refuses to fight and just sits down in the ring and smells the flowers in all the ladies’ hair. The book was originally controversial because adults thought it was taking sides in the Spanish Civil War, but the underneath story has far outlived that war. What happens is that on the day the scouts from Madrid come out to the countryside to look for ferocious bulls, the gentle Ferdinand happens to sit on a flower that had a bumble bee in it. Of course he gets stung and so leaps up and runs madly around the pasture until he is caught and taken in a cart to the bull fights in Madrid. When Ferdinand refuses to fight, the bull fighters cry and stomp their feet, and Ferdinand is taken back to the countryside in the same cart.

The point Mrs. Touhey in the film was making is that it’s okay to be tough, but it’s also okay to be gentle. In a real-life happy ending – or at least in a happy high point in the real families’ lives – Michael Oher was instrumental in the Baltimore Ravens winning the 2013 Super Bowl game. News stories about

the event tied it into the film and included happy quotes and pictures from both Oher's birth mother and his adoptive family.

Another book that the mother reads to the children as they snuggle in the bed that is going to be Michael's is Maurice Sendak's famous *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963). It too was controversial when it first came out because critics thought it would frighten children, but actually it had the opposite effect for most children because the little boy in it manages to tame "the wild things" by staring into their yellow eyes, and in the end he floats back home to his bedroom where his mother has left supper for him "and it is still warm."

Even though the book had been at the top of the list of popular picture books for over fifty years, it got a boost in popularity in 2009 when a full-length film came out and when President Obama chose to read it at the 2009 White House Easter party. Graphic designers for the film presented the title as if it were handwritten by someone using a crayon. Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show* cleverly used the same style, but with a slight alteration in spelling to make a big sign that read, *Where the Riled Things Are*. He used it to introduce a segment focusing on the current lack of civility in public discourse.

But actually, Stewart has contributed his own share of uncivil allusions based on children's literature. For example, he referred to Speaker of the House, John Boehner, who sometimes tears up, as *Captain Blubber Pants*. This is a pun on the popular *Captain Underpants* books by Dav Pilkey. The first one was published in 1997 and since then there have been ten books and three spin-offs, plus Disney's DreamWorks has acquired animation rights. Pilkey said that when he went to schools to talk to kids about his earlier books – a combination of writing and drawing – he noticed that if anyone ever said the word "underpants," there were immediate giggles and laughs and so he pondered on how he could capture such laughs for his own books. He came up with the idea of having two fourth-graders, George Beard and Harold Huchins, hypnotize their megalomaniacal principal so that he becomes Captain Underpants. Pilkey draws him to look like an overgrown baby, with a principal's face, dressed in a cape and an oversized pair of men's briefs.

Having students share media allusions about children's literature was a good way to start class because most of what we found came from amusing cartoons or light-hearted advertisements. But over the last few semesters, we began to find that the allusions, although they came from the same sources, were more somber. This idea developed out of a March 9, 2009 discussion in *Newsweek* magazine's "Media" column under the title, "A 'Terrible, Horrible, No Good' Trend." The three-paragraph story pictured Judith Viorst's 1972 *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. Reporter Seth Cotler had noticed that in the last few years *Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* had become almost trite in news stories and headlines. He went into the Nexis search engine to see what he could find. He reported that the few references to



the phrase appearing in 2005 and earlier had mostly related to the book itself. But starting in 2007 after Salon.com used the phrase to accurately predict what Attorney General Alberto Gonzales was facing at an inquisition over the firing of US attorneys, Viorst's string of adjectives was used in some fifty news stories including ones about convicted Senator Ted Stevens, Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner, and "doomed" cabinet nominee Tom Daschle. Since then we have seen it used in relation to countless politicians and on June 15, 2013 to describe Tiger Woods' "Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day" at the US Open golf tournament.

When Walls contacted author Judith Viorst to ask her why her title was suddenly so popular, she conjectured that it was because the kids raised on the book have now reached adulthood and "are running the world." Walls concluded his story with, "Well, maybe not the world, but evidently a newsroom or two." Our students thought that Viorst was being overly modest because there are many other books written in the 1970s that aren't finding their way into media allusions. One opinion was that the phrase is so successful because of its succinctness and the way it rolls off the tongue. Viorst is a poet and, as such, found seven words that have alliteration and rhyme, plus perfect balance and scansion. Other students focused on the meaning of the phrase, which is particularly apt for a decade which began with the September 11th attacks and ended with a severe economic recession.

Casual comparisons between folktale allusions from earlier years and those that have come in lately also reveal the increasing level of pessimism coming from professional creators. For example, an early Hansel and Gretel cartoon showed Gretel asking the Witch about the nutritional value of the food in her enticing house, while a recent television commercial showed poor Hansel and Gretel entering Wall Street and fearfully dropping bread crumbs behind them in hopes of finding their way out.

A full-page advertisement that used to make students laugh was created by US Plywood based on "This Is the House that Jack Built." It showed an adoring wife cuddled up to her proud husband and bragging, "This is the room that Herb paneled." Students laughed, not only because the couple was so cute, but because it showed how much women have lowered their expectations. In contrast to this loving picture is a more recent cartoon drawn by Tom Beck in which Jack is standing alongside "The house that Jack built," with a screw through his belly. Next to him are a bureaucrat and a Supreme Court justice holding up *Eminent Domain* and *Public Use* signs. Beck was protesting the Supreme Court decision affirming the power of government to take land from private citizens.

Cartoonist Don Landgren used Dorothy and Toto from *The Wizard of Oz* to make the same point. The two are standing next to a Supreme Court justice holding a paper headlined "Sic: Eminent Domain Ruling." While Dorothy is

nostalgically saying "There's no place like home," the Justice steps in to finish her statement with "... to take for business development and more taxes, My Pretty."

Undoubtedly helped along by the success of Gregory Maquire's *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* and by anniversary celebrations of the original *Oz* book and film, there have been even more allusions than usual to Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*, and they too reflect current concerns. In one the Wicked Witch is saying, "Forget the slippers. I want Tin Man's Oil!" while in another, Dorothy has sold the Tin Woodman to a recycling center in exchange for the bus fare to get back to Kansas.

We used to see *The Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe* in cheerful advertisements such as one in which she was happily serving Hawaiian Punch to all her children, but one cartoon shows her empty shoe bearing a *FORECLOSURE* sign, while another shows a realtor standing in front and saying to a colleague, "It looked kinda dumpy, but appraised at a million-two." Even Winnie-the-Pooh cartoons have been affected by the economy. Lucas Turnbloom drew a puzzled Winnie-the-Pooh saying, "Oh, Bother," when he sees that the "100 Acre Realty" has posted a "*FORECLOSURE*" sign on Mr. Sander's tree-trunk.

Many of the original nursery rhymes, which have been saved and passed on to our children, started their lives as succinct political slogans and insults. In the middle of today's rancor, the quip, "Liar, Liar, Pants on Fire!" has come full circle and is now being used by people both in their private and public conversations. In July of 2010, Mike Lukovich drew a cartoon of four people on a typical city street. All of them have fire sprouting from their backsides. One man is saying, "The evidence is overwhelming. Global warming's real..." Another burning man argues, "Liar, Liar, Pants on Fire." In September of 2010, our local *Arizona Republic* published a photograph of protestors in Texas carrying a picture of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi over the professional lettered message:

Liar, Liar, Pants on Fire! Botox Can't Keep The Brain young!

This struck us as particularly mean-spirited, but probably because we are older than Nancy Pelosi.

The pleasant feeling of adults bonding with children over picture books is so strong that a new fashion for baby showers is to use children's books as an organizing theme. After attending one such shower, we looked on the Internet and found something like a dozen websites filled with photos and ideas of how to coordinate everything from the invitations to the games that are played. And of course the guests were invited to bring a book as a gift for the "well-read" baby.

The organizers had the most fun making food to match classic picture books. Sitting on the buffet in front of Dr. Seuss's *Green Eggs and Ham* was a plate of green deviled eggs with little rolls of sliced ham on toothpicks. Eric Carle's



*Very Hungry Caterpillar* was standing next to a beautiful green salad decorated with a handcrafted caterpillar made from heavy-duty ribbon gathered to make a long, bumpy cylinder. Judi Barrett and Ron Barrett's *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* was of course illustrated with a platter of meatballs, while sitting nearby was Tomie de Paola's *Strega Nona* and a bowl of spaghetti. The guests went home with little sacks of cookies, which had been sitting on a table with Laura Joffe Numeroff and Felicia Bond's *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*.

Of course publishers and booksellers are happy to promote such an idea online, but even more important to the success of such a complicated event is the ability for whoever is hosting the party to be able to use email to organize the details and to even send photos to show people what they are expected to contribute. And best of all, new parents will have bedtime stories to read their children to sleep for years to come.

### Points of Departure

1. Talk to your parents or to someone of their age and try to find out two or three ways that their childhood schooling differed from yours. How much of this change is due to new technologies? How much to new attitudes?
2. Did you ever have a Teddy Bear? Why do you think that bears are among the first symbols that children learn, as in "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" and in getting a "bear hug." Some children even think that going "bare naked" or being "barefooted" is dressing like a bear.
3. Think back on your elementary school days and decide which of your teachers had a sense of humor. If you didn't have a humor-loving teacher in school, maybe you can think of a baby-sitter, a scout leader, a coach, or a religious or community leader, or even someone on television. What did the person do to give you the impression that he or she enjoyed and practiced humor? Did that person's humor make you think that maybe you also wanted to be funny?
4. Do you remember the *Curious George* books about a playful little monkey? They were written and illustrated by H. A. Rey so long ago that your grandparents might even remember them. Did they help you understand the meaning of such terms as "monkey bars," and "Stop monkeying around"?
5. Here are some other animal-related terms that were used with a cartoon for a 1969 *New Yorker* cover drawn by Lee Lorenz. How many of the terms have you heard? They do not have exact meanings, but try to explain a situation when someone might say one of them as

a kind of joke. Which of the expressions would a child be likely to misunderstand, i.e. which of the expressions are really joking statements for adults? From a literary point of view, try to figure out why the statement became well known. Does it rhyme or repeat the same sounds, or is it just a succinct way of presenting a humorous image?

- Lord love a duck
  - I'll be a monkey's uncle
  - In a pig's eye
  - The cat's pajamas
  - See you later, alligator
  - It's a dog's life
  - Drunk as a skunk
  - You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink
  - Snug as a bug in a rug.
6. If you can, bring in a book that you really enjoyed as a child. Tell the class about it and why you enjoyed it. Or if you know a young child today, find out what book he or she likes and analyze the book to see if you can figure out why it appeals to the child. In your report, be especially aware of humor, irony, parody, wordplay, innuendo, etc.

Here are three true anecdotes about gender issues.

**Anecdote 1:** This story is approximately 100 years old. At a fashionable social event, Noel Coward (1899–1973) approached Edna Ferber (1885–1963), who was wearing a mannish-looking suit. He looked at her and said, “You look almost like a man.” Her response was, “So do you.”

**Anecdote 2:** In 2003 when Alleen was teaching an “Introduction to Language” class, the Dixie Chicks singing group was in big trouble for having criticized America’s involvement in the Iraq War. One of the members, Natalie Maines, had apologized to the audience at a London Concert, where she told the audience that she was ashamed that the President (George W. Bush) of the United States was from Texas, which was the home of the Dixie Chicks.

Alleen wrote a question on the class chalkboard asking whether the students thought that one of the reasons the group was being so heavily criticized was because of their name. She had envisioned people saying to themselves, “Just who do these *chicks* think they are?”

Alleen was surprised when her students disagreed. A girl who grew up in the South said the word *Dixie* was more responsible for the outrage than was *Chicks* because *Dixie* stands for the South, and Southerners are taught to be genteel and respectful of authority. Another student said that the success of the *Dixie Chicks* name – the reason it caught people’s attention in the first place – is that its connotations are so far removed from those of the typical “Southern Belle.” When Alleen said that her generation of feminists considered the expression “chick” to be almost an insult, the students were surprised because to them the word *chick* simply means “a young female.” A couple of other students suggested that by taking the name *Chicks*, the group was parading its own strength by showing that they could turn the negative connotations around, just as people have done with such terms as *black* and *queer*.

**Anecdote 3:** The class then went on to talk about the connotations of *ram* in the name of the *Los Angeles Rams*. When Alleen asked what this word made them think of, they mentioned such words as the *Dodge Ram* truck, a *ram-rod* muzzle, a *battering ram*, to *ram* something down someone’s throat and to be *rambunctious*. To stand *ramrod*-straight is to be stiff or rigid. After this

observation, someone in the class said that the word had sexual connotations, and someone else offered the idea that *ram* is to sheep and goats, what *cock* is to chicken. Then Alleen asked if the *Los Angeles Rams* and the *Dixie Chicks* could change names. Of course everybody laughed because they realized that the teacher was talking about the broader concept of gender, which includes the physical difference and the attitude and expectations commonly thought to belong more to one sex than to the other.

### The Humane Humor Rule

Because women are more social than men, they also tend to be more socially aware. It's not surprising, then, that it was a woman, Emily Toth, who was responsible for the first Humane Humor Rule. She advised, "Never target a quality that a person cannot change." This rule first appeared in Toth's "Female Wits" in the *Massachusetts Review* (1981). Since then, five additional Humane Humor Rules have been suggested by various humor scholars:

- Target yourself (i.e. use self-deprecating humor).
- Target your own ethnic group or gender, but not other ethnic groups or genders.
- Never target the victim.
- Always target a strength, so that it empowers rather than humiliates the target.
- Be sure that there is spatial, temporal, and psychological distance before making fun of a tragedy. Remember: Tragedy + Time = Comedy.

There are three major differences between men and women: physical, emotional, and intellectual. Physically, males and females have different bodies, but beyond that we aren't sure how much of the difference between genders is caused by inherent biology and how much by their upbringing. Emotionally, women are assumed to be more caring and more emotional than are men. They are stereotyped as sentimental and "sweet." Men are viewed as the protectors and providers of their families, which in pre-industrialized society meant being physically stronger. But today, as more of the "heavy lifting" is done by machines, women are physically able to do more of the work that is needed for families to survive. Many women are as educated, or more educated, than their husbands and so in much of the "work" that is required to keep our families and our countries going, women are as able as men. However, the one irrefutable difference between males and females is that the female gives birth and cares for the young – which can be a long and arduous process. Today, some people think that because of this one basic difference, women may be better at multitasking, and at living in the moment.

In his book, *Humor and Society: Explorations in the Sociology of Humor* (1988), Marvin R. Koller decorated the frontispiece with the quote "After God created the world, He made men and women. Then, to keep the whole thing

from collapsing, He invented humor.” He credited the statement to Guillermo Mordillo in *Stuttgarter Zeitung, Germany*. Then, later in the book, where he wrote his own Chapter 8 on “Sexual and Gender Humor,” he began with:

Perhaps the most emotionally charged topics with which humor deals are sex, sexuality, and gender. This chapter examines sexual and gender humor to help explain why they evoke such predictably strong responses, what underlies their attraction–repulsion components, and how they underscore struggles between those who wish to sustain traditional views about the appropriate status and roles of males and females and those who seek to emancipate both men and women from what they believe is social bondage.

We’ve heard people say that “No man would listen to a woman talk, if he didn’t know it was his turn next.” This is a psychological difference, but there are also physical differences between men and women related to our reproductive organs and to our plumbing, as shown by how many jokes there are about whether the toilet seat should be left up or down. During Breast Cancer Awareness month here in Arizona during the fall of 2016, high school cheerleaders were reprimanded for wearing T-Shirts with the message, “Save Our Boobs!” A few years earlier, when weather forecasters began to use the Arabic word *haboobs* to refer to the heavy dust storms that every summer roll into our Phoenix Valley from the surrounding deserts, waitresses at our favorite pizza restaurant were wearing T-shirts with the message “Watch for our Haboobs.” Of course we noticed and smiled at them, but the next time we went in, they were back to wearing their old mundane shirts that bore just the name of the restaurant. We asked them where their cute shirts were, and they explained that a few “senior citizens” had complained and so the manager took them all back.

Because people are expected to follow gender patterns, we have special terms – or at least we used to have – to indicate that someone is going against expectations, for example, *woman barber*, *male nurse*, *woman driver*, *lady mailman*, and the *Powder Puff Derby* for women pilots. Often, the terms associated with males are more positive, more prestigious, and more powerful. Here are a few examples where the male term is military and the corresponding female term is from the private sector: *adjutant* vs. *helper*, *clerk typist* vs. *secretary*, *major* vs. *majorette*, and *orderly* vs. *cleaning lady*.

However, many terms that used to be applied almost exclusively to one gender or the other are currently in transition. For example, our grandparents probably expected to see a man when they went to “the doctor,” and they expected his “nurse” to be a woman, but this is no longer the case. Because the term *doctor* connotes high prestige, women are willing to go to medical school and to serve internships and do whatever it takes to officially become a *Doctor*. In academia both males and females are referred to with the term *Doctor* or *Professor*. But going back to the field of medicine, we have noticed that some of the males who fill “helper jobs” in medicine prefer more gender-neutral

titles such as *technician*, *therapist*, *lab assistant*, *medic*, and *researcher*. Their hesitation probably relates to the fact that only women can *nurse* or *breast-feed* babies, which marks the word as in the female domain.

A related point is that the longer a gender-marked word has been in the language, then the more likely it is to keep its masculine or feminine connotation, as with such words as *Duke* vs. *Duchess* and *King* vs. *Queen*. But with animals, it is often the female form that seems to be the most important and will be used to refer to the whole species. For example, on cattle ranches most of the male calves are castrated to become steers. They will soon be slaughtered as beef, because they cannot produce milk or calves. Also, a rancher knows that he needs only one bull for a whole herd of cows. This same kind of discrimination is also true for chickens. The “sexter” in a chicken hatchery has the job of sorting through all of the chicks and keeping the hens while discarding almost all of the roosters. The phrase “Cock of the Walk” comes from the fact that only one rooster is needed for each flock of chickens. This “cocky” attitude is extended to people and metaphorically to guns, which need to be “cocked” before they can shoot.

In the 1970s when sexism and language were first coming to the attention of critics, Alleen wrote this sad little story that illustrates how closely gender and aging stereotypes go together for females:

The chicken metaphor tells the whole story of a girl's life. First, a young woman is a chick; then she marries and begins feeling cooped up, so she goes to hen parties where she cackles with her friends. Then she has her brood. And when they leave the nest, she begins to henpeck her husband, and finally turns into an old biddy.

In a 2007 article entitled “In Defense of the ‘Chick Flick,’” Gloria Steinem suggested that the ‘chick flick’ is not such a bad genre: “It has more dialogue than special effects, more relationships than violence, and relies for its suspense on how people **live** instead of how they **die**.” Steinem suggested that the opposite of the “chick flick” should be called the “p\*\*\*k flick.” These would include:

- Movies about war,
- Movies that glorify bloody deaths and vigilantism,
- Movies that portray violence –
- Especially violence against women – preferably beautiful, sexy, half-naked women.

In our family, we both prefer the chick flick because we think it is smarter, quieter, and more subtle.

Consider the metaphorical triad of the *lady bug*, the *sea cow*, and the *black widow spider*. Historically, women were seen as being placed into one of these three categories. The *lady bug* was the cheer leader, i.e. the attractive woman

who dresses nicely and uses the right kind of make-up. The *sea cow* was the supportive woman who spends most of her time taking care of her husband and her children. These women don't have a life of their own, which is what inspired Nora, in Henrik Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* (1879), to leave her womanly responsibilities and "do her own thing." So did the two women in the *Thelma and Louise* movie. In casual talk, the *Black Widow* is the well-educated and smart woman who competes with men, very often supervises men, and also is capable of taking "their" jobs.

Obviously men and women have different bodies and different psyches, but psychological differences aren't quite so obvious, and most people would agree that men's humor is not the same as women's humor. Men tend to be lecturers while women are listeners; therefore, men "hold the floor" longer. Men use more negative face (competitive social out-bonding) while women use more positive face (cooperative social in-bonding); in other words, men tend to be more hierarchical, competitive, and exclusive, while women tend to be more social, interactive, and inclusive. But as women have more and more power and prominence in society, these trends are changing, so that now when we see a counter-example of these generalizations it is difficult to determine whether it is an outlier, or an indicator of social change. In other words, in today's world, gender roles are not as clear-cut as they used to be.

However, some fairly recent gender jokes are based on the same old stereotypes. For example, people who say that computers are *male* support their argument by saying that in order to get their attention, you have to turn them on; they have a lot of data, but are still clueless. They are supposed to help you solve problems, but much of the time, they **are** the problem; and as soon as you commit to one, you realize that if you had waited a little longer, you could have had a better model.

People who say that computers are female support their argument by saying that no one but the Creator understands their internal logic; the language they use to communicate with other computers is incomprehensible to everyone else; even your smallest mistakes are stored in long-term memory for later retrieval; and as soon as you make a commitment to one, you find yourself spending half your paycheck on accessories for it.

Regina Barreca has written such books as *They Used to Call Me Snow White, But I Drifted* (1992), *Perfect Husbands: and Other Fairy Tales* (1993), *Untamed and Unabashed: Essays on Women and Humor in British Literature* (1994), and *If I Lean In, Will Men Just Look Down My Blouse?* (2016). The title of this later book is a play on Sheryl Sandberg's popular 2013 book, *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*, that gives advice to women who want to succeed in the corporate world.

Barreca says that "women's lives have always been filled with humor." For women, humor emerged "as a tool for survival in the social and professional

jungles,” and it works as a “weapon against the absurdities of injustice.” Women didn’t suddenly get funny in the 1990s any more than women suddenly got intelligent in the 1980s, got ambitious in the 1970s or got sexually aware in the 1960s. Wendy Wasserstein adds, “When I speak up, it’s not because I have any particular answers; rather, I have a desire to puncture the pretentiousness of those who seem so certain they do.”

Another really good book to read is *Women and Comedy: History, Theory, Practice* edited by Peter Dickinson, Anne Higgins, Paul Matthew St. Pierre, Diana Solomon, and Sean Zwagerman. It was co-published in 2013 by Rowman & Littlefield and the Fairleigh Dickinson University Press. Regina Barreca wrote the preface in which she makes the point that “the belief of women’s inferiority in terms of humor has never really gone away. Yes, it’s gone into remission. But it doesn’t actually disappear ...”

Think of it this way: there you are, reading or listening to Nora Ephron, Samantha Bee, Chelsea Handler, Sarah Silverman, Shazia Mirza, Caroline Rhea, Tina Fey, Mindy Kaling, Wanda Sykes – or Aphra Behn, Jane Austen, and Frances Burney – then suddenly: WHAM, there’s some straight white guy announcing that women aren’t funny and – here’s the rub – he’s getting air time and print inches for this pronouncement.

We need to study gender stereotyping so that we can recognize the stereotypes in literature, sit coms, standup comedy, etc. where:

- The humor might come from the stereotypes being adhered to,
- Or from the stereotypes being reversed,
- Or from additional gender stereotypes that are even funnier because listeners might not have thought of them before.

Here’s an obvious joke about how differently kids communicate with their Moms and with their Dads. To Mom, the kid says, “I’m hungry,” “I’m cold,” “I’m hot,” “Can I have...?” “I want to watch...,” “Where are you?” “Can you ask Dad...?” “Can you help me?” “He hurt me,” “She hurt me,” “When are we...?” “Why are we...?” “Why can’t we...?” etc. To Dad the kid says, “Where’s Mom?”

### **Humorous Names for Males and Females**

Of course there are lots of reasons for people to change their names, but often it relates to their gender. For example, when we worked in Afghanistan in the late 1960s, we were introduced to an American man working for AID (Agency for International Development). He was named Shirl. After we became friends, we asked him about his unusual name. He explained that it was a substitute for *Shirley*. His family had used Shirley as a man’s name for four generations, but then in the 1940s, the child actress Shirley Temple put such a feminine stamp



on the name, that he had shortened his name to Shirl, and certainly had not given the name to his son. In a similar way, one of our elderly professor friends is named Beverly, but he uses his initials B. G. for a first name. Other “male names” that have slipped into common use for females include Ashley, Carol, Dana, Kim, and Leslie.

But times change, as shown in an August 2016 Sunday edition of the *Arizona Republic* newspaper, which devoted nearly two full pages to a story entitled “Stylishly Seeking GENDER-NEUTRAL.” The photographs were of children wearing what the reporter called “gender-neutral clothes,” but really several of the items were “cross-gendered” rather than “gender-neutral.” A father named Chris was showing off his toddler son dressed in a shirt that had big letters on the front reading “Tough Like MOMMY,” while his daughter maybe a year older was wearing a shirt that read “I Love (represented by a drawing of a heart) My Thighs.” Another photo showed a mother wearing a T-shirt that read “Love Yourself!” Her young daughter’s T-shirt read “Smart Girls Club,” while her young son’s shirt was printed with a radiant cloud that read “LOVE.”

Accompanying this movement toward gender-neutral clothing is a movement toward gender-neutral names. Some countries provide lists of male names and of female names that parents are required to choose from. Also, in some religions, the name of a new baby must be approved by whichever church leader is going to be in charge of the naming ceremony. This is not as true as it used to be, but it does explain why so many popular names of older people were borrowed from characters in the Old Testament or the New Testament. However, in most places the choice of a name is left to the parents, who usually want to follow the customs of their social group.

### **Feminist Humor**

In the early 1970s, feminists throughout the United States began looking at the English language to see how various usages continued to perpetuate old practices that we viewed as sexist. Of course people don’t like to be criticized for something as natural to them as talking, and so many people began thinking of feminists as “Old Grouches” or serious-minded “Prudes.” But of course, that’s not how we feminists thought of ourselves, and so we began looking for touches of humor that could illustrate some of the problems in our language, while at the same time making people smile. Here are some of the discoveries that were reprinted – both for their humor and their underlying lesson about the entrenchment of sexism – in the 1977 book, *Sexism and Language*, published by the National Council of Teachers of English.

In October 1971, *LIFE* magazine gave the heading “An Airline’s Ad Encounters Some Turbulence” to a story about the protests and the picketing that National Airlines was receiving for their “I’m Cheryl. Fly Me” advertising

campaign. Feminists protested that the sexual connotations of this slogan were offensive and inappropriate. However, their protests did not keep the advertisers for Continental Airlines from coming up with an even sexier ad, "We really move our tail for you!"

The *Saturday Review* June 24, 1972 issue featured an article by George Malko on "How to Get Interviewed by Dick Cavett – in Several Tricky Lessons." He quoted one of the pre-interviewers who said of her criteria for selecting guests,

First of all, if we find a pretty girl who also talks, she can almost invariably get on a talk show. We're forever looking for pretty girls who can talk because the *Cavett Show*, if you've noticed, very rarely has girls. There aren't very many girl talkers. There are occasional women talkers, like Margaret Mead, but there aren't many young, pretty girls who also can hold a conversation with Cavett. Johnny Carson can fool around with them, act sexy, look down their dresses, make a couple of sly remarks, roll his eyes, and get an interview out of that. Cavett doesn't do that. He tries to find a girl he can have an intelligent conversation with."

On March 4, 1973, Russell Baker wrote a *New York Times* column that was either humor or ridicule. Readers had to decide for themselves. He replaced *man* with *person* in all the words he could think of. He came up with such paragraphs as

When you begin to brood about Halderperson, the futility of personal labor and the Weatherpersons, warm up the phonograph, put on Benny Goodperson playing, "In Old Personhattan" or "Can't Help Lovin' That Person of Mine," sip a little glass of Personischewitz, and you'll lose that murderous impulse to rush into the streets shouting, "Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum, fifteen persons on a dead person's chest!"

Although Baker probably offended many feminists, he did make the point that replacing *man* with *person* was not as simple a solution as it might at first appear. If you read the paragraph aloud being careful to re-insert *man* for *person*, you will see what he meant.

In October of 1973, Dr. Spock, the famous author of *Baby and Child Care*, which for generations was *the* book that new parents went to for directions on how to care for a baby, announced that after 27 years and 201 printings of his famous book, he was now going to use the plural pronouns (*they*, *them*, and *their*) in place of *he*, *him*, and *his*. He apologized for the awkwardness and also that throughout all of his previous books, parents of girls had been forced to mentally switch the masculine pronouns to feminine ones. His explanation this time for not just switching to feminine pronouns (as a way of taking turns) was that he had to save the feminine pronouns to refer to the mothers.

The October/November, 1974 newsletter of the New York State NOW (National Organization of Women) chapter carried a prominent announcement of "Woman's Place is in the World" T-shirts. The sizes offered were *Men's Small*, *Men's Medium* or *Men's Large*.

In December of 1974, Sol Saporta gave a paper at the Modern Language Association meeting in New York. He quoted from a recent college advertisement which ended its announcement with “We will hire the most qualified person regardless of his sex.”

The May/June 1975 issue of *Women’s Wear Daily* included a half-page feature adapted from the *Columbia Journalism Review*. The writer said that “Man, as all dictionaries agree, can be as much a generic, sexless word as *horse* or *dog*. We have not yet resorted to *racemare* or *seeing-eye bitch*. Why then, *chairwoman* or the even clumsier *chairperson*?” He went on to say that “The irony is that violating the language in this fashion undermines the cause of women’s liberation, in whose name this battle is being waged. The result is not a more adequate recognition of women’s equality, but a verbal ugliness that makes a valid cause seem unnecessarily dubious.” What do you think?

In the spring of 1975, the US Department of Labor brought out a 363-page book entitled *Job Title Revision to Eliminate Sex- and Age-Referent Language from the Dictionary of Occupational Titles, Third Edition*. Although the whole book was devoted to changing such terms as *craneman* to *crane operator*, and *stewardess* to *flight attendant*, the cover clearly stated that the book comes from the US Department of Labor and *Manpower Administration* (italics added).

Doubleday & Company sponsored an in-house contest in which employees competed to find the best written examples of sexism in the English language. First-place winners were Amoy Allen and Elena Scotti, who both turned in an ad from the May 4 *New York Times*. Under the pre-Mother’s Day caption, “Give your Mother the World,” was an advertisement for the Harcourt Brace Jovanovich book by Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made*. It was cited as an example of the patriarchal assumption of our Judeo-Christian culture that the world is made and inhabited by males only.

An advertisement for the First Women’s Bank in the *New York Post* of February 27, 1976 read in part, “And if you need a loan just ask one of our experts. He keeps Excedrin in his desk.” Five days later the same ad ran in the *New York Times* with copy changed to read: “And if you need a loan just ask for one of our experts. (They keep Excedrin in their desks).”

### Points of Departure

1. The next time you go to a movie, think about whether or not it was devised and directed to appeal more to either males or females. Make a note of the clues you got (including the advertisements) as to whether it was directed more specifically to men or to women.

The 2011 movie *Bridesmaids*, which was produced by Judd Apatow, Barry Mendel, and Clayton Townsend, and starred Kristen Wiig and Maya Rudolph, was called a “Raunch Comedy.” Reviewers assumed that the “sexy” parts were inserted to draw male viewers. What other characteristics can movie producers use to attract both males and females to their film?

2. Read one of Regina Barreca’s books and either write or tell the class about an insight that you hadn’t thought of before in relation to language and gender. If you know someone twenty years older than you, it might be interesting to interview that person on the subject of sexism and language and then compare his or her ideas to your own.

One of the definitions that our dictionary gives for *geography* is “a description of the distribution and observation of the diverse cultures of the earth’s surface as the inhabitants relate to each other and sometimes to the world around them.” Of course this is a huge topic, and so all we can do in this one chapter is to provide a sampling of what makes either individuals or particular groups of people laugh or smile, or maybe groan and protest – even if just inwardly – when they interact with each other and with the words that are used to talk about the physical world which surrounds them.

An obvious example of this kind of humor is illustrated in the kinds of jokes that people tell each other based on where they live. For example, in America, humorous feuds are common about the superiority of one or more of the fifty states that make up the “United States of America.” The secret behind the success of such jokes is that no one state is clearly ahead of all the others, so the jokes continue to feed on each other. For example, it’s unclear just which American state comes out the best (or the worst) in this riddle about the three states of Kansas, Nebraska, and South Dakota, which on a map look like they are stacked on top of each other with Nebraska in the middle, Kansas below, and South Dakota above. Here’s the joke:

Why is Nebraska so windy?

Because Kansas sucks, and South Dakota blows.

### **Humorous Place Names**

A major difference between place names and personal names is that place names are more generalized than are personal names and so the first step in a place name becoming a word in the general vocabulary is for speakers to choose what feature of a particular place they intend for the name to communicate in its extended use. Speakers usually try to ameliorate or lend positive connotations to the names of places where they live, but they do not hesitate to apply negative-sounding names to the places belonging to “other” people. The humorous names given to places – whether to buildings, parks, towns, or

unusual attractions made by nature – are wonderfully informative both about the past, i.e., what was happening at the time the name was given, and about people's hopes for the future. For example, the town in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, named *Intercourse*, includes a note on its welcoming sign that reads "Formerly Cross Keys," as a kind of explanation of the meaning of the town's name, when it was given back in 1754 as an explanation of different rivers or streams that crossed each other in the area. Today, the "sexy-sounding" name is what makes tourists get off the freeway to go and visit the village, which has something like 1,000 residents.

Here is an international joke about a world-wide telephone survey conducted on only one question: "Would you please give your honest opinion about possible solutions to the food shortage in the rest of the world?" The survey failed because:

In Eastern Europe there was no agreement about what "honest" meant.

In Western Europe they didn't know what "shortage" meant.

In some places in Africa people didn't know what "food" meant.

In China they didn't know what "opinion" meant.

In the Middle East they didn't know what "solution" meant.

In South America they asked what "please" meant.

In the USA they didn't know what "the rest of the world" meant.

Here in Arizona where we live, we have towns with such positive-sounding names as *Carefree*, *Golden Valley*, *Inspiration*, *Paradise Valley*, *Sun City*, and *Youngtown*. But earlier in our history, disgruntled people who were having a hard time working their way across our hot deserts in the southern part of the state and our mountainous terrains in the north, as they were trekking to what they hoped would be a better life in California, bestowed such place names as *Booze Crossing*, *Contention*, *Del Muerte* ("of death" for a canyon where there was a massacre), *Grasshopper Junction*, *Hookers Hot Springs*, and *Tombstone*. Of these names, *Tombstone* is the only one that still appears on modern maps, and it uses the name to attract tourists and film makers to come and see what "the Old West" was like.

Creative artists use the names of well-known places to trigger memories and images and to establish modes. Advertisers want to do something similar, but the instant worldwide communication made possible by modern media adds complications to the old practice of using place names as trademarks. For example, the name of the city of *Boston* can trigger an unlimited number of thoughts, while the images aroused in listeners' and speakers' minds will be much more specific once the name of the city has been lexicalized by being brought into the language to communicate something more than a physical location, as in such phrases as *Boston baked beans*, *Boston cream pie*, *Boston fern*, *Boston ivy*, *Boston rocker*, or *Boston terrier*.

Because place names are so generalized, the metaphorical extensions that come from them can be based on a wide variety of sources, for example:

- The metaphor of being caught in an emotional *maelstrom* highlights the actions of nature in a place near the Lofoten Islands off the West coast of Norway. It is called *Maelstrom* (grinding stream) because ocean currents join at the spot and form a permanent and often violent whirlpool.
- The phrase *meeting his Waterloo* to refer to “a complete and devastating defeat” originated from the fact that the Belgian town of Waterloo happened to be only a couple of miles away from Napoleon’s last battle where in 1815 he was totally defeated.
- The Isle of Lesbos is the source of the word *lesbian* based on the activities and the attitudes of the residents who lived there around 600 BC. The most famous of the philosophers and writers was the woman scholar and poet, Sappho, who taught and wrote poetry, much of it romantic, with a group of intellectual young women.
- *Harvard beets* were named by the chef who figured out how to keep the deep red color of beets when he pickled them. Their color reminded him of Harvard University’s football uniforms, plus he probably wanted to “borrow” for his product some of Harvard’s prestige.
- The words for *jeans* (from cloth woven in Genoa, Italy) and *denims* (from *serge de Nimes* heavy cloth from Nimes, France) provide good examples of how worldwide trade contributes to the lexicalization of place names.

Just as luck is involved in which personal name becomes an eponym, luck also plays a role in which place names develop a special meaning and become fully incorporated into a language. Speakers and listeners are more likely to remember a newly invented word if there is something about its sound that reminds them of the situation being described. For example, *to be shanghaied* means “to be forced or tricked into an undesirable situation.” The idea comes from the very real practice in the late 1800s of ship captains managing the kidnapping of drunken or incapacitated sailors and loading them onto ships heading for an undesirable place that was a long way away, which is an accurate description of what the real area of Shanghai was for foreigners arriving in China. Shanghaied soldiers would be loaded onto ships – maybe even tied to the masthead or locked in a room – until the ship was so well underway that they couldn’t “jump ship.” The name of many distant ports could have been used, but *Shanghai* was dramatic and easy for English speakers to pronounce and on a subconscious level might have reminded listeners of “hanging high.” Decades later in 1933, author James Hilton wrote his book, *Lost Horizons*, in which *Shangri-La* grabbed the public’s attention because its meaning was so different from *Shanghai*. *Shangri-La* is the name of a remote, beautiful imaginary place where life approaches perfection.

Less dramatic examples of place names being incorporated into everyday use include such phrases as *Afghan hound*, *Argyle socks*, *Bermuda shorts*, *Denver omelet*, *Lima beans*, *Long Island tea*, and *Texas toast*. Sometimes, but not always, the place name which has been serving as an adjective will move over to become a word standing alone, e.g. as happened with the word *Holstein* (rather than a *Holstein cow*) and with *Oxfords* (rather than *Oxford shoes*).

Also, as such words become more common, they lose their capital letter, as with *italics* to refer to a slanted type font from Italy, and with *roman* to refer to an upright print font from Rome. This kind of place name looks and sounds even “more” alike when the spelling and pronunciation refer to items that are now clearly English as with such words as *calico* (cloth from Calcutta), *organdy* (cloth from Urgendi, Turkistan), *sleazy* (cloth from Silesia, Prussia), *guinea pigs* (animals from Guyana), *mayonnaise* (a kind of sandwich spread from Port Mahon), *cologne* (from Köln, Germany), and *bedlam* (from the name of the Hospital of St. Mary of Bethlehem, known as Bethlem, an infamous psychiatric institution in London).

Once place names are in the lexicon of a language they undergo processes similar to the ones described for personal names in the chapter on “Names,” but because the names start out so generalized the processes are not as clearly distinguishable from each other. But we know that every Chamber of Commerce works to bring positive connotations to the name of its town or city. *The Big Apple* for New York City is one of the few purposely created nicknames that has worked. Manhattan, Kansas has tried to cash in on the success by advertising itself as “The Little Apple.”

In 1993, the Federal Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia, announced that it was naming a newly discovered disease *Four Corners Hantavirus* “in honor” of the area of its discovery on the Navajo reservation where the states of Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona meet. When people living in the area protested, the Center then said it would use the name *Muerto Canyon Hantavirus* named from a nearby canyon. Again, local residents protested because *muerto* is Spanish for “the dead” and the canyon had been the site of a Navajo massacre. In June of 1994, when authorities said they would use the name *Hantavirus Pulmonary Syndrome* for the disease, which by then had killed forty-two people in eighteen states, there were no protests. The hantavirus family of diseases is named after the Hantaan River in South Korea, where the first strain was discovered when it infected 3,000 American soldiers during the Korean War. Apparently no one living near the Hantaan River in South Korea heard about this issue on the Navajo Reservation in North America.

When place names are used in the titles of books, films, and musicals, a further kind of generalization is occurring because the creative artist is using the place name to do more than establish a physical setting. Titles range in style from Henry James’ *The Bostonians* to Michael Crichton’s *Congo*, Agatha



Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*, Isak Dinesen's *Out of Africa*, John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, Frederick Forsyth's *The Odessa File*, Ian Fleming's *From Russia with Love*, and Graham Greene's *Our Man in Havana*. Musicals include Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma*, Alan Jay Lerner's *An American in Paris*, and Richard Rodgers' *South Pacific*. These titles can be both succinct and memorable because the names of intriguing places recognized by most educated adults trigger memories and images that go a long way toward establishing the mode of the piece. However, the images are not always positive. Lanford Wilson was clever in leaving the *o* out of *Hotel* in the title of his play *Hot l Baltimore*, because the image of a neon sign with one of the lights burned out affirms the stereotype that he was relying on, of Baltimore as rundown or seedy.

Writers wanting their readers, listeners, or viewers to come to a piece fresh are more likely to choose the names of fairly obscure places so that they can mold the audience's impressions. This is what Neil Simon did when he named his play *Biloxi Blues* and what the Coen brothers did when they named their darkly humorous film *Fargo* after a small town in North Dakota. They created such a negative image of the town that the film is not mentioned on the "City of Fargo" website, which in our web search comes below two other websites devoted to the film.

The current fashion is for manufacturers of vehicles, especially of small trucks and vans, to use place names as model names. A Chevrolet sedan is named the *Monte Carlo*, as a reminder of luxury and glamour, while Kia has a sedan named *Sorento*, which probably reminds customers of the romance usually associated with *Sorrento, Italy* on the Bay of Naples. By choosing names to imply that their vehicles can tackle rough terrain, the manufacturers of pickup trucks and vans are in some ways turning a negative image of a place into a positive image for their vehicles. Subaru's *Outback* takes its name from Australia's frontier, while GMC's *Yukon* and Toyota's *Tundra* make people think of Alaska. The ruggedness of the western United States is demonstrated in the names for Pontiac's *Montana* van, Chevrolet's *Tacoma*, *Silverado*, *Colorado*, and *Durango* pickup trucks; GMC's *Sonoma* and *Sierra* trucks; and Dodge's *Dakota* truck. Buick's *Rainier* van, Hyundai's *Santa Fe*, Chevrolet's *Tahoe*, and Kia's *Rio* and *Sedona* come a little closer to suggesting vacation trips. This is probably the same connotation that the Pepsi Cola company was hoping for when it named its new lemon–lime soda *Sierra Mist*.

The vehicle names are just daunting enough to suggest a challenge. Companies wisely steered clear of the many truly negative place names that dot the western "frontier" in such names as *Hell's Canyon*, *Death Valley*, and *Dead Man's Pass*. Scholars surmise that these names were given by discouraged travelers who were on their way to what they hoped would be much better places. When people give names to places they identify with and plan to stay in,

they are more likely to give the kinds of optimistic names that today's developers and real estate agents devise.

This incident illustrates how much more comfortable people are to assign the names of negative things to far-away places. Condoms have long been called *French letters*, except in France where they were called *English caps*. In most countries, syphilis was known as the *French disease*, while the French called it the *Naples* or *Italian disease*. Poles referred to it as the *German sickness*, people in Holland thought of it as the *Spanish pox* and Asians called it the *Portuguese disease*.

It is called an *exonym* when people from outside a group choose a name for that group and then use it in insulting ways. People living in *Wales* have long resented the name because it originally meant "strangers" or "foreigners." When the Angles, the Saxons, and the Jutes came into England, they pushed the people who were already there up into the western hills and then added insult to injury by using the name they assigned them in insulting ways as in the old nursery rhyme, "Taffy was a Welchman /Taffy was a thief...."

Place names undergo a unique kind of generalization when people recycle names by giving them to additional places as in *New England*, *New York*, and *New Jersey*. The names of *Harlem* and *Toledo* were also recycled from city names in Holland and Spain, but they were not marked with the word *new*.

According to the September 23, 2004 *Astrobiology* magazine, Mars mission control scientists have devised a system of naming features on Mars after interesting places in Antarctica. "Whenever explorers go somewhere, we always want to name things," explained ASU geologist Jim Rice. "It just makes it more personal. It allows us to leave a little mark on the surface of another planet. It's just something we humans like to do."

It is because humans like to recycle place names that we have to be careful to specify whether we are talking about *Washington DC* vs. *Washington State* or about *Portland, Oregon* vs. *Portland, Maine*, and whether someone graduated from *Indiana University* in Pennsylvania or from *Indiana University* in Indiana. Another kind of generalization occurs when place names have become so lexicalized that they give rise to second-generation metaphors as in the name of *dotted Swiss cloth*. The name is thought to be an allusion not to Switzerland but to the holes in Swiss cheese. The cloth is a light-weight, see-through muslin with flecked dots applied in an evenly spaced pattern. *Polka* is the feminine word for someone from Poland. The *polka dance* gets its name from this term, and in a second-generation metaphor so does *polka-dot cloth*. The pattern of the dots is similar to the foot patterns in the dance.

A good example of a place name that has given rise to second- and third-generation metaphors semantically far removed from the original place name is *sandwich*. The food item is indirectly named after Hawaii, which used to be called the *Sandwich Islands*. (Captain Cook named the Sandwich Islands in

honor of British diplomat John Montagu, the Fourth Earl of Sandwich, Kent.) In the 1790s, the Earl asked that meat wrapped in bread be brought to him at the gaming table so that he could continue to gamble while eating. This new meaning of *sandwich* has eclipsed the place name and given rise to such metaphors as when on family vacations, young children complain about being *sandwiched* in the back seat of the car between older brothers and sisters. Middle-aged women feel put-upon because of being members of the *sandwich generation* in having to care for elderly parents and teenaged children at the same time. Senior citizens joke about soon having to walk the streets with *sandwich boards* campaigning for the preservation of their Social Security benefits.

Commercial interests are a huge factor in today's language development and change. However, the instant communication of the Internet and the closeness of today's "Global Village" complicates the matter as companies go to court to fight over whether particular place names should be considered as generalized or specialized terms. Back in the 1870s, the Anheuser-Busch company chose the name *Budweiser* for their beer. The name literally means "from Budweis," the former name of a town in Czechoslovakia (now called *Ceske Budejovice*), which since medieval times has been known for its high-quality beer, including one named *Budweiser*. Because of this name, Anheuser Busch cannot sell its beer in Czechoslovakia and other parts of the world where the Czech company had already established its name. Early in the 1990s, Anheuser-Busch executives traveled to Ceske Budejovice in hopes of buying the brewery. Members of the European Beer Consumers Union got word of the proposal and wrote an open letter to Czechoslovak President Václav Havel asking him to stop the deal. The letter, which made front-page news in Czechoslovakia and was reported throughout Europe, read in part, "We believe Anheuser-Busch's motives in seeking the Czech brewery are to gain complete control over the name, to exclude the Czech product from the rest of Europe and to appropriate the heritage of Ceske Budejovice for their own purposes." In the summer of 2003, the issue was again in the news when *TIME* magazine (August 11, p. 18) reported that Anheuser-Busch had just lost court cases over the name in Lithuania and Japan.

Other cases in the same short feature included the Italian processor of *Parma ham* going to court to sue a Canadian company, which registered the name for themselves, thereby forcing processors from Parma, Italy to come up with a new name before selling their product in Canada. Wine growers in the Champagne region of France have also banded together to keep wine imported into France from being labeled as *champagne*. A few years ago, they managed to keep an American perfume company from calling one of its fragrances *Champagne*.

Such terms as *Idaho potatoes*, *Maine blueberries*, *Florida oranges*, and *California raisins* originally developed informally, but by now are mostly protected by trade organizations. However, they are umbrella terms covering groups of growers who still have their own trademarks. Today's experts in

naming generally advise against companies creating their trademarks from place names because as their businesses expand they may end up having names that contradict their addresses as happened in Phoenix, Arizona where the original *7th Avenue Auto Parts* expanded to several other addresses before going out of business. New York's *Saks Fifth Avenue* high-end department stores had enough prestige to expand beyond their home town and also to create their *Off 5th* outlet stores, but an Associated Press news story (October 2, 2004) announced the closing of eight of their stores and three of their outlet stores. It is hard to imagine such a name going worldwide. In contrast, according to James R. Gregory the *Avon* cosmetics company currently does two-thirds of its business outside of the United States. It was fortunate to have a trade name that because of Shakespeare's association with *Stratford-on-Avon* has positive connotations appropriate to its world-wide customers.

There are many metaphors to explain life:

Life is a box of chocolates.

Life is a river.

Life is an uphill battle.

Life is a walk in the park.

Life is an automobile wreck.

But the best metaphor is that

Life is a Journey.

As we travel we discover that every country has its own special kind of humor. We'll provide just a sampling of the diverse humor that can be found in various countries. Physical humor (humor without words) translates well from country to country. The stars of America's silent films had international audiences. Examples include Charlie Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy, The Three Stooges, and Buster Keaton.

Political cartoons also cross international boundaries. One of the great ironies in American history is that New York City's Boss Tweed tried to get artist Thomas Nast to go and study art in Europe. He wanted to get him to stop drawing cartoons, because many immigrants in New York could not read, but they saw the pictures making fun of Tweed's dishonesty. Nast declined the offer, so Tweed himself traveled to Europe; however, he was recognized in Spain by a customs agent and was returned to the United States to stand trial for many of his crimes against the city. Tweed's downfall was that the cartoons exaggerated his salient features so he was more easily recognized as he was fleeing to Spain and running away from the political scandal at home.

Public art is another kind of humor that translates well from culture to culture. In Melbourne and Adelaide, Australia, an upside-down bronze statue and statues of bronze pigs decorate a pedestrian walk. In Brussels, Belgium there is a statue of a criminal coming out of a sewer and tripping up a policeman. In

Toronto, Canada there are statues of cows in a public park. In Beijing, China, there is a statue of a kid climbing over a wall. The kid has a hole in his pants, revealing his bare bottom. In Prague, Czechoslovakia, there is a man hanging by one arm from the roof top of a building. In Oxford, England, a shark is entering the roof of a building, while in London a huge spider visits the mall. In Potsdam, Germany, a huge rhinoceros hangs from a structure in a public park. In Budapest, Hungary, a cow appears to be melting into the sidewalk. In Klaipeda, Lithuania, an outline statue of a ghost is crawling out of the water and onto the dock. In India the Cand Baori fountain has a ridiculously long path to the bottom – and an equally ridiculous path to the top. In Amsterdam, Netherlands, a statue of a man carries a violin case and puts on his hat, but there is no head underneath the hat. In Amsterdam, a statue of a man is in a tree cutting off the limb that he is standing on. In Wrocław, Poland zombies are emerging out of a sidewalk, while in Onesti, Romania, a large statue of a face in a public space looks down at the people below.

In Singapore, bronze children are jumping down into the river. In Bratislava, Slovakia, a bronze statue of a man shoots a pistol around the corner of a building. In Valencia, Spain's Gulliver Park, a huge image of Gulliver lies on the ground. He is so big that he makes the park visitors feel like Lilliputians. And in Taipei, Taiwan, bronze hippos have half of their bodies submerged into a brick walkway.

Many people who travel from country to country discover that each country has its own sense of humor, irony, parody, paradox, and satire. As we've travelled, we've found that one of the funniest things in every culture is their dead metaphors. English language learners are surprised at such expressions as "kidney beans," "elbow macaroni," and "the tongue of a wagon." Likewise, students of Farsi (Iranian Persian) are surprised by the fact that walking is described as "baa xate yazdah" (going by bus line number 11). The joke is that the 11 stands for your two legs. They are also surprised that a "ladybird" is "kafsh duzak" (little shoe-smith), and that "ostrich" is "shotor-morgh" (camel-hen). These examples were provided by Behrooz Mahmoodi-Bakhtiari of the University of Tehran. In Farsi (the language of Iran), these are dead metaphors and are not funny to the Iranians, but to an outsider learning Farsi, they are amusing. Here are some examples from Dari (Afghan Persian), given to us by Sajida Kamal from Kabul University and the University of Nebraska in Omaha:

Popcorn is "chos e fil" (elephant's fart) – recently changed to "pof-e fil" (elephant's puff).

Turkey is "fil morgh" (elephant chicken).

Turtle is "sang posht" (rock back).

Walnut is "chahar maghs" (four brains) – Think about it; inside of a walnut shell you will find a left hemisphere and a right hemisphere on the top, and a left hemisphere and a right hemisphere on the bottom – hence "chahar maghs" (four brains).

A yearly humor festival in Gabrovo, Bulgaria, attracts visitors from around the world. They have a museum called the “House of Humor and Satire” with tanks and guns made out of soft cloth. In front of the House of Humor and Satire are statues of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. Bulgarians make fun of the fact that Gabrovians are always saving money. Gabrovians erected a statue of their humorous founder Racho Kabacho (Racho, the blacksmith) in the middle of the river, because that was where the land was cheapest. During their annual festival, dozens of people dress like Charlie Chaplin with mustaches, top hats, tuxedos, oversized shoes, and canes. They walk in straight lines and make right-angle turns. Much of their humor is visual, so that international visitors can also understand the humor.

In Germany there is a genre called “Schadenfreude” humor. An example is Germany’s “Der Struelpeter,” a dark figure who burns up little children who play with matches, and cuts off the fingers of little children who play with scissors. This dark figure is designed to teach children that there are serious consequences for doing bad things.

The Irish Rogue is not a criminal. He is bright and charismatic, but also very subversive. Eoin Colfer’s *Artemis Fowl* books (recently written for young readers) are about a typical Irish Rogue, in the tradition of Christy Mahon in John Synge’s *Playboy of the Western World*, Mr. Boyle in Sean O’Casey’s *Juno and the Paycock*, Finn MacCool in James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, and Sebastian Dangerfield in J. P. Donleavy’s *The Ginger Man*. Jonathan Swift was even being a bit roguish when he wrote *A Modest Proposal*. Rogues are revered in Ireland, because it was the Rogues who fought back when the English were taking over Ireland. Rogues break rules and laws, but it is always for the greater good. Rogues are entertaining and high spirited, and they diffuse violence with their use of humor. Although they are flirtatious, they seldom form any lasting alliances with women. Many rogues are linked to an aristocratic figure, usually an Irish rebel chief, for whom they risk their lives. The ‘rogue’ is articulate, good-natured, fun-loving, and exhibits an irrepressible *élan vital*. Rogues tend to be imaginative and resilient comic figures.

The Japanese are said to be very serious during working hours. They consider their bosses and their fellow workers as part of their family, and they do their best to be productive and impress their working companions. But after working hours, they go to karaoke bars, drink sake, and make fun of their bosses and their companions. Such humor is usually slapstick and silly.

In contrast to Japanese humor, the humor created by American Indians is part of everyday life. It tends to be physical, and involves many practical jokes. Navajos will often parody white men by talking loudly, boasting, and interrupting others. When a child is born into some Navajo families, everybody tries to make the child laugh, and the first person who is successful in doing so becomes a part of the family. There is even a formal ceremony to induct this



laugh-inducer into the child's family. In Native American cultures, "contraries" or "ritual clowns" do things backwards, as demonstrations of what not to do. For example, they ride their horses backwards; they wear little clothing in the winter and much clothing in the summer; they lift great weights with ease and have difficulty lifting light weights; they attack a powerful enemy, and cower at a lesser power; and they say the opposite of the truth.

After a group of Romanians had attended one of our International Society for Humor Studies conferences (1986) at Arizona State University, they sent us back a full-page news story about the conference. Of course, we didn't understand any of the Romanian language, but we were amused by the sketch of ASU's Gammage Auditorium (designed by Frank Lloyd Wright), and Tempe, Arizona's upside-down-pyramid city hall, which gets lots of attention. A group of Russians attended the same conference. The closing dinner was held at Rawhide, a tourist city designed for Wild-Wild-West re-enactments. The Russians loved being dressed in Western garb, with cowboy hats, bandanas, vests, and six-shooters, and especially having their pictures taken with a waitress dressed as an American Old-West barmaid.

As a conclusion to this section, a town along a railroad line in California is named Modesto. It is now the eighteenth largest city in California and is the county seat for Stanislaus County. As of the 2014 census, it had over 200,000 residents. It was named back in the 1800s when railroads were being built all over the Western United States and the custom was to name the points where a depot, or a station, was located – most likely where two tracks met or crossed each other – in honor of the foreman of the building crew. But this particular "boss" graciously declined the offer of having his name given to what would someday most likely become a real settlement. He was so insistent that the Spanish-speaking workers took it upon themselves to name the town "Modesto," which in Spanish means "modest." This means that the crossing was named after their foreman, but just not in such an obvious way, which actually makes it a more interesting story.

A different kind of origin story is about how a small town in Arizona got its name of *Why*. It is located in the desert about thirty miles north of the US border with Mexico and about ten miles south of Ajo. When the 2000 census was taken, *Why* had 116 residents. A couple who lived there during the winter months told us that the town started as a campground where people with live-in campers or trailers would stop to spend a few weeks or maybe all of the winter months in the warm desert. When friends would stop by to visit, they would always ask "Why here?" The couple we knew told us that this is what gave rise to the town's name *Why*.

However, a competing story, which sounds more credible, is that when the "campground" first developed, it was located at the point of a Y intersection, where a single highway divided into two roads. The residents, who wanted to put up a mailbox so they could get their mail delivered, proposed calling their

town *Y*, as a designation of the split in the two highways. However, postal authorities insisted that all town names had to have at least three letters, and so they changed the address to *Why, Arizona*.

An especially interesting place name in New Mexico is *Truth or Consequences*. It got this name only in 1950, after a popular radio quiz program called *Truth or Consequences* advertised that it was looking for a town that would change its name to *Truth or Consequences*. The Tourist Bureau in New Mexico forwarded the information to the mayor's office in Hot Springs, and the City Council members were enthusiastic, as were the townspeople, about all the publicity that might come their way. A vote was held and the decision made to formally change the name. Before then, it was a tourist town called Hot Springs, but the new name and the related publicity gave it a leg-up on letting people know about the town. However, the name is so long that many residents of New Mexico simply call it *TC*, sort of like Californians refer to *Los Angeles* as *LA*.

The biggest influence on names in Don's home state of Utah came from the early Mormon Church. Back in the mid-1800s, the West-Central part of the United States was largely an unsettled desert and mountain area with the relatively few inhabitants being Native Americans, many of whom belonged to the *Utah* or *Utaw* tribe. These Native Americans lived throughout the area that eventually became the states of Nevada and Utah, and parts of Colorado. The Mormons had hoped to incorporate all of this land into what they wanted to call *Deseret*, a name for "honeybee" as used in the *Book of Mormon*. Brigham Young, who after the death of Joseph Smith was the leader of the Mormon Church, had noticed how industrious and how cooperative honey bees were and he thought the name would be an appropriate symbol for the new state. The federal government denied this request, but still people in Utah are well aware of the symbolism of bees because Utah has a beehive on both its state seal and its flag, and the name *Deseret* survives in the name of the LDS church-sponsored charity, which is named *Deseret Industries*.

To help the settlers be proud of their grand accomplishment in turning a barren desert into a civilized area, Mormon leaders encouraged the settlers to include the word *city* in the names of the towns they established, even if they were small. As the years have gone by, the *City* designations began to fall away, but on a contemporary map we still saw *Brigham City*, *Cedar City*, *Lake Havasu City*, *Heber City*, *Moab City*, *Park City*, *Payson City*, *Provo City*, and *Salt Lake City*.

### Points of Departure

1. Look at the name of the town where you most recently lived and see if you can figure out why it was given its particular name. Was it all in seriousness, or was there a bit of humor involved?



2. What about the street names? Try to find out how those names were chosen and whether there are any humorous stories behind the names?
3. Do you know any high school or college cheers which include the names of towns? Here is one for the high school in Duncan, Arizona, where Don had his first teaching job. Duncan was a small farming community, Clifton was slightly bigger and had stores for shopping, while Morenci was the biggest and the oldest and was built on the site of a large copper mine.

Clifton is a city  
Duncan is a town  
Morenci ain't nothin'  
but a hole in the ground!

4. In television sitcoms and in novels, the language of some of the most humorous characters reflects where they were born and raised. For example, in the United States, Westerners are known for their exaggerations, Southerners for their drawls, and Down-East Yankees (Easterners) for their taciturn nature and reluctance to speak, as in a story told about Calvin Coolidge, who was US President in the 1920s. He was seated next to a woman at an official White House function. She leaned over to him and confided that someone had bet her that she couldn't make him say three words. Coolidge responded, "You lose!"

Try to think of an observation or a joke about the way people speak in your own geographical area, or in an area you have gone to for vacation, etc. It might be just a single word that is used or pronounced "differently," or it might be a whole speech attitude, as in the joke about President Coolidge.

5. Take a look in advertisements for the selling of new houses in a particular town or neighborhood near where you live. Look at the street names to see if they present a particular attitude that will help interest potential buyers.
6. Because of our warm climate in Arizona, many senior citizens come here to live either year-round or just through the winter. Of course, the people who build either whole communities of residence halls for senior citizens (what used to be referred to as "Old-Folks' homes") try to think of such positive names as *Sun City* and *Friendship Village*. One of the very first communities built in Mesa, Arizona is called *Leisure World*, but then jokesters started calling it *Seizure World*. Pretend that you are going to invest money in a

new business serving senior citizens. As a potential investor, can you think of a positive-sounding name for your investment?

7. Go on the Internet and look for sites called something like “Unusual Place Names.” See if you can find a couple of “Unusual Names” that include humor. Caution: Much of this kind of humor will be vulgar, partly because different parts of the world give different meanings to sex-related terms.

Our post-retirement hobby has been teaching classes and making informal presentations to groups of senior citizens where we talk about various aspects of humor. Because we live in the part of Arizona that has mild winters, we get to talk to people from all over the United States and Canada who have come here to retire, or to at least spend a few winter months in the sun. We first started getting serious about our new career in humor studies in the 1980s when Art Buchwald, whose humorous editorial columns appeared in over 500 newspapers, came to the ASU campus and warned us that it would be very difficult to have an academic conference with a “Humor” theme because some people would be disappointed after coming to a conference with the expectation of laughing the entire time. His prediction proved true when one of the first pictures taken by a newspaper reporter was of three bored-and-snoozing university professors listening to a presentation about “What Makes Something Funny?”

Max Shulman was our keynote speaker at the first ASU April 1st Humor Conference. Most of us at the conference were familiar with his writings, including *Barefoot Boy with Cheek*, and *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis*, which had been turned into a popular TV series. Because we respected his talent, we were grateful to him for sharing one of his guiding principles. In talking about the difference between ridicule and humor, he explained that if he created a joke or told a story that would make listeners think, “Ah ha! I know someone like that,” he would get a laugh. But if he told a story that made readers think, “Oh no! That’s me!” people would have their feelings hurt and he would get silence (or worse).

We accepted his observation at face value and taught it to a generation of ASU students. And when we began taking presentations to groups of senior citizens, we went prepared with such jokes as the one about the old man in his Cadillac who is backing up to get the right angle for squeezing his car into the last space in a parking lot. Just when he’s ready to drive in, a student in a little sports car out-maneuvers him and takes the space. As the kid gets out of his car, he chides the old man with, “See what you can do if you’re young and quick?” The old man ignores him, puts his car in gear, and to the sound of breaking

glass and crunching metal moves forward into the space, and says, "See what you can do if you're old and rich!"

Another story that we've used at the beginning of classes is about a doctor who says to an 83-year-old woman, "There are some things not even modern medicine can cure. You know, I can't make you any younger." "Who asked you to make me younger?" she replied. "I want you to make me older!" And still another gerontology story is about a doctor who tells an 80-year-old man, "You're in excellent health; you'll live 'til you're 80!" "I'm already 80," says the man. "See, what did I tell you!" exclaimed the doctor.

Of course the senior citizens who come to our presentations laugh at such jokes, but as we've worked with different groups, we have learned that in general their response to jokes is almost the opposite of what Max Shulman told us. The jokes that bring the most happiness and inspire the longest laughs are the ones that participants tell about themselves in such a way that the audience members think, and sometimes say out loud, "I've had that happen!" or "That's me too!" As we've pondered on why senior citizens enjoy jokes that make fun of themselves or of people they identify with, we've decided one reason is that humor is naturally edgy, and so it often touches on details that our mothers or our doctors or even books and magazines have not mentioned.

If we took the time in class, we feel certain that every one of our elderly students could share at least one surprise – something they hadn't expected in this process of growing old. For example, we have often shown a video available on the Internet of senior comedian Mary Maxwell, who after giving the invocation at a 2010 dinner honoring "Home Instead" caregivers in Omaha, Nebraska, went on – since she was already holding the microphone – to have "a little chat with God." One of the parts of her "little chat" most loved by our class members was Maxwell's casual mention of "non-life-threatening skin growths large enough to name after deceased pets or relatives." Class members loved finding out from her that such growths were normal and not necessarily the beginnings of cancer. They were also relieved that she let us in on the secret of how surprised she was when she tried to brush off a random hair, only to find that it was growing out of her chin. And because our generation has a longer life-expectancy than did previous generations, many of us have not lived with old people, so we are our own first subjects in learning about old age. The March 25, 2015 issue of *TIME* magazine focused on changing health conditions and pictured on the cover a bright-eyed baby with the caption, "This baby could live to be 142 years old." This means that it would not be considered "middle aged" until it was over sixty. Maybe this is what people are thinking of when they say that "sixty is the new forty."

Already in the United States, people over 60 outnumber people under the age of 15. And the fastest growing demographic in America is women over the age of 80. It is not that today's bodies have undergone basic changes; instead,

the changes in how long people now live have come from the development of new technologies and new attitudes. Just think how many people's lives have been positively affected by such a simple invention as eye glasses. More recently:

- We are all grateful for vaccines and for insulin and penicillin, and the way that the government agencies go right to work at the first sign of a "new" contagious disease.
- Think of how many automobile accidents have already been avoided because of the way that rear-view cameras now show images to drivers of what is behind their car, which is nothing compared to the potential of cars that will practically drive themselves or at least automatically brake when getting too close to something in the road ahead.
- Houses, as well as public buildings, are being built with consideration for the elderly; for example, with alternatives to stairs and with walk-in showers, and wide door frames to accommodate wheelchairs.
- Modern conveniences, such as automatic washing machines, electric stoves, the centralized management of waste, the invention of heating and cooling machines, and the commercialized preparation of ready-to-eat foods, have all made it much easier for people to manage "the basics" of life.

Of course not everybody is happy about people living longer lives, as shown by a joke that a student brought to one of our classes. He began by saying that he wasn't advocating that we "kill off all the old people, but maybe we should outlaw WARNING! labels, and then let nature take its course!"

We all laughed, partly because he was a good storyteller and he had a twinkle in his eye, plus it was surprisingly different from the jokes that other people had been bringing in. The fact that he was as old as the rest of us was also important in helping us to think about *other* old people – not us – because all of us in the room considered ourselves as way too smart to need those troublesome warning labels, which in fact we have been ignoring for years.

In another of our senior citizen classes, we were watching a PowerPoint on gender-related differences, and we laughed at a cartoon showing a toilet seat chained down. The funny drawing elicited a conversation on why – especially for women – it makes such a big difference whether the toilet seat is down or up. The eyes of one woman in our group lit up, and when we called on her she explained that when she gets up to urinate at night she keeps her eyes closed so it will be easier to go back to sleep. Other women nodded their heads, apparently because they do the same thing. But then came the surprise in her story. One night when she automatically reached out to make sure the toilet seat was down, she felt something warm, soft, and sort of moist. In shock, she screamed and jumped backwards so fast that she broke the shower door ... Her husband had been sitting on the toilet.

This resulted in the biggest laugh of the four classes we taught to this group. We weren't laughing at the storyteller; instead we were laughing at the whole situation of growing old and the unpredictability that comes with changing conditions. She was a wonderful storyteller and at another session she told us about her recent visit to a beauty salon in her neighborhood shopping center when there was a bomb scare. A police officer poked his head in the front door and shouted "LEAVE IMMEDIATELY – GO RIGHT TO YOUR CARS AND DRIVE HOME!" When this happened, she had been only halfway through getting a permanent. Of course we had all noticed that she was wearing a wig that day, but we hadn't asked for the details. The wig resembled her own hair, except that it had more body and the front of it was in a bouffant style, while her real hair hangs down in bangs. She explained that she had been invited to a special dinner at a fancy restaurant. About halfway through the dinner party, everyone at the table started laughing. It was such a contagious laugh that she too began laughing, even while she was asking, "What's so funny?"

The joke was that when she had tipped her head and leaned forward to hear what was being said at the other end of the table, a soda straw from her neighbor's Coke had gotten caught in her bouffant hair. There it was, sticking straight out and bobbing up and down as if it were a fancy Chinese hair decoration.

In a different class, a grandmother told about being invited to her granddaughter's kindergarten class for "Grandparents' Day." When she got to school, she discovered that the child's other grandparents had driven in from out-of-town and when it was time for the child to introduce these grandparents, she gave a glowing description of all the accomplishments of the out-of-town grandmother and grandfather. After this report, the little girl was quite exhausted, and all she could think to say about her "close-by" grandmother was "This is my other grandmother, who always parks at the far end of the parking lot because she thinks it's healthy for us to walk." Besides eliciting a laugh from the class, this story inspired a whole set of stories about grandkids vs. grandparents.

The next week, one grandmother brought in a photo of four generations of her family attending the 2016 Comic Con in Denver. She brought the photo so we could look at it on our big screen, and see from her costume how her son-in-law had adapted her wheelchair so that it had big wings on both sides. We appreciated seeing her as a *TIE Fighter* because the week before when she told us about the upcoming event we thought she had said she was going to be dressed as a *typewriter*. What she was proudest of was that the same little granddaughter, who used to sneak over to her house to watch *Star Wars*, was in attendance and was introducing her own young daughter to the latest science fiction.

For a last example, a man told us a funny story that he wasn't really ready to laugh at, but the rest of us were. He had made himself a solemn promise

to get more exercise, and so he and his wife went to all the trouble of selling their house, buying a new house, and moving two miles down the road to live adjacent to a golf course. He loved playing golf and was looking forward to walking all over the beautiful new golf course. But shortly after they were all moved in, they discovered that the club had recently put in new rules demanding that all players must rent an electric cart “so as to keep things moving.”

In pondering on why these “Me too!” stories consistently elicited hearty laughs, we came up with the following reasons:

- Rather than sharing these stories on the first day of class, participants waited until they had bonded with the class through other kinds of laughter, so the stories were being told *by* and *to* friends.
- While on the surface, the stories seem self-deprecating, they include redeeming features; for example, the woman with the wig was proud that she could afford to go to a beauty parlor and that her extended family wanted to take her out to a fancy restaurant.
- We were comforted by the fact that we are all together in this business of growing old, and if other people can laugh at their mishaps, maybe we can too.

We got this idea when one of our smartest friends came home from his fiftieth year college reunion and compared the actions and the attitudes of his friends at the recent reunion to what they had been like ten years earlier at their fortieth year reunion. He had noticed that at their fortieth reunion, they were all competitively looking at each other’s clothing and cars and spouses, while asking not-so-tactful questions so as to judge their own successes in life as compared to the successes of the others in their college class. But now, his fellow students, who were either retired or soon planning to retire, were ready to sit back and honestly enjoy each other’s company, and to rejoice in their successes and sympathize with their troubles.

This may, in fact, be one of the benefits of being as old as we are. We are now mature enough to look with new appreciation and pleasure as we see the continued successes of people of our generation. On television, we get an extra bit of pleasure when we watch people near our own age still succeeding, as with Judge Judy, Betty White, and William Shatner, who was recently honored for his fifty-year commitment to *Star Trek*. We are encouraged by the sheer number of people who have long passed retirement age but who are still in the public eye. It is also encouraging to see how many of them are being accepted with their age-related eccentricities. For example, the September 11, 2016 *New York Times* gave more than half a page to an interview with 90-year-old Jerry Lewis in relation to the fact that he had played the title role in a recently released film, *Max Rose*. It is about a jazz pianist living out his twilight years in a nursing home. The title of the interview was “At 90, His Mouth Runneth

Over.” It was especially interesting to see how candidly the writer (Ruth La Ferla) reported such facts as that Lewis has each of his shirts monogrammed because “I want to know it’s mine.” Also, he never wears the same shirt twice. “Why would I?” he confided. “I’m rich.”

Judith Viorst is an author, now in her eighties, who in 1972 wrote the children’s book *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. When Alleen taught Children’s Literature classes, this book was always a favorite. It was recently made into a full-length movie, based more on the title than on the contents. About ten years ago, a reporter noticed how often the “Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day” phrase was being used for headlines and for leads on news stories. He googled the phrase and found over fifty such uses within a six-week period. When he asked Judith Viorst about it, she modestly ascribed its popularity to the fact that the children who had grown up reading the book were now managing the newsrooms of various publications.

That’s only part of the answer. The real reason is that Viorst is a powerful poet who succinctly captures people’s ideas and feelings, and in the 2016 presidential election, reporters frequently found ways to use her phrase, “terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day” to describe events in both Hillary Clinton’s and Donald Trump’s presidential campaigns.

Psychologist Lucille Nahemow suggests that humor is a vital part of the aging process, because it can change our perspectives. For example, there is a proverb that reads, “An old maid who gets married becomes a young wife.”

In his 1988 *Too Funny to Be President*, Mo Udall defended humor as necessary to the health of political discourse because it does the following things:

- Leavens the public dialogue
- Invigorates the body politic
- Uplifts the spirit
- Brings a diverse society closer together
- Helps individuals roll with the punches, and is an antidote to self-importance.

Udall was suggesting that much of the polarization in today’s politics is there because we no longer have a sense of humor. But in order for society to develop a sense of humor, all or most of the members of that society must understand that in politics, a sense of humor is necessary in order to see all points of view. As people get older and there are more and more years in their pasts and fewer and fewer years in their futures, they also need a sense of humor to see all points of view. Tragedy plus time equals comedy. The older we grow, the more experiences we have, and the more distance we have from these experiences. By now, all of our experiences should have become humorous, even the “tragic” ones – *especially* the “tragic” ones.

In order to commemorate her 79th birthday, Julie Andrews made a special appearance at Manhattan’s Radio City Music Hall for the benefit of AARP.



One of the musical numbers she performed was an updated version of “My Favorite Things” from *The Sound of Music*. Here are some of the lyrics:

Box tops and nose drops and needles for knitting,  
Walkers and handrails and new dental fittings,  
Bundles of magazines tied up in string,  
These are a few of my favorite things.

Then she continues with:

When the pipes leak,  
When the bones creak,  
When the knees go bad,  
I simply remember my favorite things,  
And then I don't feel ... So bad.

Some of the memes about growing old that are being circulated have “more truth than poetry” in them. One meme states that an old guy's childhood punishments have become his adult goals: Going to bed early, Not leaving his house, and Not going to a party.

Another meme asks “Do you know that awesome feeling when you get into bed, fall right asleep, stay asleep all night and wake up feeling refreshed and ready to take on the day?” Then he answers with, “Yeah, me neither!”

A meme entitled “Senior Moments” has as its caption “The First Senior Moment.” It is a drawing of two dinosaurs on an island watching Noah's ark fade slowly into the distance. One dinosaur is saying to the other one, “Oh Crap! Was that today?”

Still another meme shows an old woman saying “My memory is so bad...” Another old woman asks “How bad is it?” to which the first old woman responds “How bad is what?”

Much of the humor related to aging notes the irony that the stages a person goes through in order to reach Middle Age are the same as the stages we go through from Middle Age to old age. This can be seen in modes of transportation as the baby buggy or stroller becomes the tricycle, which becomes the bicycle, which becomes the sports car, which becomes the family van, which becomes the ambulance, which becomes the motorized wheelchair, which finally becomes the nurse-pushed wheelchair as used in assisted living facilities.

Another humorous-but-true way of looking at old age is the pie chart of time spent sleeping (25 percent), eating (15 percent), working (10 percent) and looking for things I had just a minute ago (50 percent).

In a joke about a long and happy marriage, an old woman is sipping on a glass of wine, while sitting on the patio with her husband. She says, “I love you so much. I don't know how I could ever live without you.” Her husband asks,

“Is that you, or the wine talking? The woman responds, “It’s me ... talking to the wine.”

And finally, there is the light switch in a Doctor’s office. It appears to be an advertisement for Viagra or Cialis. It’s a picture of a man with the light switch just below his belt. It’s easy to see that the light switch can be placed in either the up- or the down-position.

On *YouTube* a viral video entitled “Age-Activated Attention Deficit Disorder” shows an old lady with short-term memory loss being distracted each time she starts a new task. On her way to washing her car she notices some letters on the table. She decides to separate them into bills and junk mail. As she puts the junk mail into the waste basket, she notices it’s full, but before emptying it, she decides to pay her bills. But then she discovers that there is only one check left in her check book, so she goes into her study to get a new check book. But there she finds a half-drunk bottle of warm Coke, so she decides to put it in the refrigerator. But as she enters the kitchen, she notices that the kitchen flowers need watering, but as she is watering the flowers, she spills some water on the floor and decides to clean it up. When she picks up her Coke, she discovers her glasses which she had been looking for all morning. Taking them back to her desk, she spots the TV remote on a table, so she decides to take it back to the living room. At the end of the day, she realizes that the car isn’t washed, the bills aren’t paid, there’s a warm bottle of Coke on the table, the flowers aren’t watered, there’s only one check in her check book, she can’t find the remote or her glasses. She can’t figure out how nothing got done, because she’s been very busy all day and is very tired.

### Points of Departure

1. Judith Viorst has written a series of books illustrating her observations on growing old. See if you can find one of them in a library, a bookstore or online, and bring it to class so that you can share a poem that you think does an extra good job of illustrating a new insight about aging:

*Forever Fifty and Other Negotiations*, illustrated by John Alcorn (1989).

*Suddenly Sixty, and Other Shocks of Later Life*, illustrated by Laurie Rosewald (2000).

*I’m Too Young to Be Seventy and Other Delusions*, illustrated by Laura Gibson (2005).

*Unexpectedly Eighty and Other Adaptations*, illustrated by Laura Gibson (2010).

2. Years ago, Alleen's father came to her 48th birthday party and commented with sadness that his mother had died at age 48, "and she was an old woman." Later, when we thought about his comment, we were surprised at the many differences in Alleen's life and in the life of her grandmother, who was part of a pioneer family settling in northern Arizona in the early 1900s. We have only one picture of this grandmother. It was taken on her wedding day and she is sitting down because she was taller than her husband. She isn't smiling because she was missing a front tooth and the family could not afford to send her away to a city big enough to have dentists. She never lived in a house with electricity or running water, while Alleen of course has always lived in such houses. She gave birth to ten children, while Alleen gave birth to three children. She had over forty grandchildren, while Alleen has eleven. She was ambitious and well educated, but she never worked outside the home except for two days when she taught at the small community school in the town of Woodruff, Arizona, and left her baby with her oldest daughter. On the second day of teaching, the daughter came running into her mother's classroom crying and frantically holding the baby out to her mother because she thought it had swallowed a safety pin. The daughter had been holding two safety pins in her mouth while she changed the baby's diaper. One of the pins had fallen out of her mouth and into the baby's mouth. Mrs. Pace grabbed the baby and shook him upside-down until the safety pin fell out of his mouth – or maybe it was out of his throat. Either way, this was such a traumatic event that it convinced Alleen's grandmother that she had to stay home and care for her own baby.
3. Here are some of the miscellaneous "old people" jokes that our senior students have brought to class for the enjoyment of fellow students. Alleen remembers that while she was in graduate school at the University of Iowa, her oldest professor came to class one morning with a smile on his face because he had just seen a bumper sticker that read "Getting Old is Hell, but Remember the Alternative." Bumper stickers used to be the main way that such statements were spread around, but now that we have the Internet and now that newspapers and magazines are looking for humorous "little" fillers, such quips are found in a variety of places. Here are some examples of miscellaneous sayings somehow related to aging. Are there any that you would recount to a grandparent or to an elderly neighbor?
  - Half our life is spent trying to find something to do with the time we have rushed through life to save.

- If you don't learn to laugh at trouble, you won't have anything to laugh at when you're old.
  - One must wait until evening to see how splendid the day has been.
  - This thing of being a hero, about the main thing to it, is to know when to die.
  - When you are dissatisfied and would like to go back to youth, think of Algebra.
  - I just did a week's worth of cardio after walking into a spider web.
  - Senility has been a smooth transition for me.
  - Sunday, March 13, 2016 begins Daylight Savings Time. Don't forget to set your bathroom scale back 20 pounds on Saturday night.
  - A recent study has found that women who carry a little extra weight live longer than men who mention it.
  - I don't mean to brag but ... I finished my fourteen-day diet in three hours and twenty minutes.
4. Here are seven "Fashion Hints" for Seniors. Can you think of other examples? Things that DO NOT go together:
- A belly button ring and a surgery scar
  - In-line skates and a walker
  - Midriff shirt and a midriff bulge
  - A nose ring and bifocals
  - Pierced ear rings and a monocle
  - Short shorts and varicose veins
  - Spiked hair and bald spots.
5. Texting for Seniors – New Interpretations for Common Initialisms.
- ATD – At The Doctor's  
 BFF – Best Friend's Funeral  
 BTW – Bring The Wheelchair  
 BYOT – Bring Your Own Teeth  
 CBM – Covered by Medicare  
 FYI – Found Your Insulin  
 LOL – Living on Lipitor  
 ROTFL ... CGU – Rolling on the Floor Laughing – Can't Get Up.

With this list, we were amused that our senior citizens laughed the most at the one about "Living on Lipitor," while our ASU students laughed the most at the one about "Rolling on the Floor Laughing." We decided that the difference related to familiarity. Many older people – but not younger students – take Lipitor (a statin medicine) while even as a joke, older people cannot imagine themselves rolling on the floor. Can you think of additional examples?

6. **A Suggested Assignment for You:** Talk to an older relative, or a neighbor, or someone you have met at church or through your parents' social activities, and ask the person to tell you a funny story they remember from their own life. Here are three examples of school-related stories that Alleen collected when she was preparing a book called *Dust in our Desks*, as part of the centennial celebration of Arizona State University. Come back to class ready to share the story with your fellow students.

- (a) **From Ann Nolan Clark**, an author who won the 1953 Newbery Medal for her book *Secret of the Andes*, taught in BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) schools for fifty years. In 1945, the Institute for Inter-American Affairs sent her to live and travel for five years in Mexico, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Peru, and Brazil. In 1972, she told this little story to a gathering of English teachers in Las Vegas.

The first day I began teaching in a Bureau of Indian Affairs School on the Navajo reservation happened to be Columbus Day. At that time, all BIA schools had the same curriculum, and our lesson plans came pre-packaged. I was supposed to tell the story of Columbus discovering America. I told the story the best I could and included details about the *Nina*, the *Pinta*, and the *Santa Maria*. Afterwards, according to the lesson plan, I was supposed to ask the children to draw pictures of the three ships. I did as I was told and was absolutely amazed when every child in the room drew three *sheeps* instead of three *ships*. We hadn't been communicating at all.

- (b) **From Donald Magie Perkins**, who grew up in Arizona and told this story in 1985 when he was working as the Director of Finance for the State of Virginia's Health Plan.

The country where I grew up was rough and rugged. It was 1940 before Arizona Highway 77 was paved between Show Low and Holbrook, and this was 20 miles from Clay Springs where we lived. My mother, Olive Magie Perkins, was a school teacher and having four children was one of her best qualifications because our attendance added at least 10 percent to the State-supported budget of whatever district she was teaching in. When she taught in the little red-brick, one-room schoolhouse in Shumway, there were only ten children, and without us, the State of Arizona wouldn't have allowed a separate school. I spent second and fourth grades (I skipped third grade) in this little school. One winter, eight out of the ten students got whooping cough. The school board, faced with the prospect of having to

close the school, decided that the eight children with whooping cough should come to school and the two who were well should stay home. Mom stopped and visited those two after school to check their assignments and give them instructions for their next day's work.

- (c) **From Maud Isaacson Pace (Alleen's mother)**, who grew up in St. Johns, Arizona where the school was first located in a building that was a public theater in the summers. Its sloping floor was a problem for any child who happened to drop a pencil, but a real two-story schoolhouse was built in time for the 1910–11 school year. She told this story in 1985.

My most vivid school memory is of the time when I was in third grade and the teacher threw a rather large book at a big overgrown boy who happened to sit at a cross-angle between me and the teacher. The boy dodged, and the book hit me just above my right eye. I saw nothing until blood poured out onto my desk. I do not remember how I got to a doctor, but I do remember going to school with my head bandaged for quite a while. The scar runs right through my eyebrow so nearly seventy-five years later I am still reminded of it whenever I use an eyebrow pencil. Years passed and eventually I returned to St. Johns to teach school in a room behind this same two-story building. By now, my former teacher had gone to dental school and was back in town with a successful dental practice. He had married my cousin and so when I had a toothache I went to him. After he finished filling my tooth, we chatted a bit and I asked him if he remembered throwing the book that hit me in the eye.

It was a good thing that I waited until he had finished working on my tooth, because my reminder had such an effect on him. He looked as if he were going to faint. Then he sat down and we talked some more. He told me how much he hated that year. He needed a job desperately, and teaching had been the only one available. The school board agreed to pay him \$65.00 a month, and then mid-year some other man came along and offered to do it for \$60.00. This forced him to take the lower salary. So now he was not only frustrated with his work, but also resentful toward the School Board. While he was teaching, he would look out the classroom window and envy the men he saw cleaning the irrigation ditches.

The German word “Zeitgeist” translates into “Spirit of the Times,” with the idea being that the humor of a particular time period can serve as a reflection of certain periods, as with the humor of the Middle Ages, Renaissance humor, Victorian humor, the Roaring Twenties etc. Some scholars believe that the “Golden Age of American Humor” was the 1920s, but it would be more accurate to define the period as running from the end of World War I to the early 1930s. This was when in comic strips we saw the development of the “little man” in Casper Milquetoast, Andy Gump, Jiggs, Mutt (of “Mutt and Jeff”), and Dagwood (of “Blondie and Dagwood”).

The humorous comic strips that became popular after World War II (the 1940s) included Walt Kelly’s “Pogo,” and Al Capp’s “Li’l Abner.” Walt Kelly’s fables were allegorical “swamps” themselves, loaded with social and political commentary behind the antics and interactions of the various animal characters. Al Capp’s “hillbillies” gave access to Capp’s views on topical events, government, and American values.

Radio “soap operas” were mainly developed during the 1930s and 1940s. They were called “soap operas” because on the radio they were often sponsored by soap companies, who wanted a way to grab the attention and the favor of housewives, the main purchasers of soap for house cleaning and family bathing, plus for doing laundry and washing dishes. Some of these shows were more sad than humorous, but still viewers identified with the extreme characters and felt obligated to watch every show. The stories were so melodramatic and overly sentimental that today’s speakers still use the term “soap opera” to describe real-life situations that are judged as “over the top.”

However, audiences soon tired of sad problems that could be resolved in thirty minutes, with time-out for commercials, so the creators began slipping in funny characters doing funny things. This was the birth of the situation comedy, which soon became known as “sitcoms.” The various segments had the advantage of being about characters that the audience already knew, but the plots were more original and the problems easier to solve. The characters ended up pretty much the same as they had begun, reflected in the theme music which was the same at the beginning and the end of each show.

In between there would be humorous complications which the characters try to resolve, although they usually end up making things worse. But then an unexpected force enters the scene and makes things right so that the characters are ready for the challenge of the next week. Someone could listen to an episode, then miss the next three or four episodes, and then tune in to a new episode without being confused.

George Burns and Gracie Allen were one of the most beloved husband and wife comedy teams on both radio and television. When she retired in 1958, Gracie's picture was on the cover of *Life* magazine, and when she died in 1964 she was featured on the news display board at the World's Fair.

When television arrived on the scene, there were predictions that from this day on, no one would read books, newspapers would die, radio would disappear, as would movie theaters. But none of this happened. In fact, television contributed to making other media more popular, while at the time becoming the most significant medium for many people. In the 1950s, families felt obligated to purchase TV sets so their children would not be left out of either the Saturday morning cartoons, or the fun of many family-oriented programs.

One of these "fun" events was the *I Love Lucy* television show (1951–1957). It was so popular that engineers in New York City discovered that the water pressure in the City would go down at exactly the time of the show's commercial breaks. The connection turned out to be that this was the time when 90 percent of the television viewers in the city would get up and go to the bathroom. *I Love Lucy* was a complete synthesis of TV, because it had the music and burlesque of "Milton Berle," the plot strength and slickness of "Amos and Andy," the charm of "George Burns and Gracie Allen" and the naturalness of "The Goldbergs." It was the first sitcom to be filmed in front of a live audience. But, most important was Lucille Ball's comedic talent and her personal ambitions which came at a time when domesticity was being held up as the be-all and end-all for women. "I Love Lucy" was a forerunner to the feminist movement of the next decade when millions of women decided that they – like Lucy – were too bright and too ambitious to want to "stay in the kitchen."

Sitcoms were developed first for radio and then moved to television where they replaced the old jokes that had been part of vaudeville and travelling shows. Old jokes were given new lives because of being tied to characters that the audience (and the writers) already knew and liked. They seemed fresh and funny because the new situations supplied the elements of surprise that are necessary for jokes to succeed. The stories could move fast because script writers did not have to set the scene or introduce new characters for each episode.

### **New Opportunities for Minorities**

One of the most successful transfers from radio to television was *The Goldbergs*. Molly Goldberg was a warm, Jewish mother with a Yiddish accent.



The family lived in an upstairs apartment in the Bronx. Her radio story was popular all through the 1930s and 1940s, and on TV from 1949 until 1954. Characters with accents had been especially recruited for radio stories, because listeners needed help in identifying speakers they could not see. However, in the 1950s, when Americans were giving serious thoughts to integration, *Amos 'n' Andy* was a less successful transfer. It had first aired on radio in 1928, and was adapted for TV in 1951. It had come out of the minstrelsy tradition, and was really “blackface comedy,” meaning that white actors were playing the black roles.

This kind of artificial humor was unacceptable on television, and the TV show (with new black actors) lasted only one year. Twenty years later in 1972, *Sanford and Son* brought a new kind of African-American humor to television, and in the 1980s *The Cosby Show* featured an upwardly mobile African-American family, but some critics thought it was “too white” to be believable. Between 1990 and 1996, Will Smith starred in a fictionalized version of his own story as “The Fresh Prince of Bel Air.” The protagonist was a street-smart Black teenager from Philadelphia sent to live with his aunt and uncle in the wealthy town of Bel Air, California. Of course there were cultural conflicts that made for humor, but it also brought up serious issues.

The first really popular TV sitcoms were family stories. In the 1950s, World War II was over and people felt a great nostalgia for the “old days” when fathers went off to work and mothers stayed home with the children. Of course, life had never been as idyllic as it seemed in retrospect, but nevertheless the idea of *family* was central. Plus, a more practical reason for having so many family shows on television was that most households owned only one TV set and so families all watched together.

But very soon, audiences wanted more than just the foibles of “Dick and Jane families.” Such families were named after the simplified “Dick and Jane” books that were used to teach children how to read in most American first grades. This meant that producers went looking for variety to go beyond *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*. We soon had *Happy Days*, *The Waltons*, and such blended or one-parent families as *The Brady Bunch*, *My Three Sons*, and *Diff'rent Strokes*. One of the most popular one-parent sitcoms of the 1950s was *Mayberry RFD*, which starred Andy Griffith as a friendly, small-town sheriff. We know from our own family, where our son-in-law made special efforts to get this show for his two young sons, that reruns of *Mayberry RFD* were viewed by second and even third generations, even though Mayberry was the only Southern town with no African-Americans. When Andy Griffith died in the summer of 2012, every obituary writer nostalgically mentioned the appeal of his popular *Mayberry RFD*.

In the mid-1960s both *The Munsters* and *The Addams Family* proved that all families are not the same. The characters in “The Munsters” are “monsters” except for the daughter, who is an appealing blonde teenager. She is

the outlier – the exception that proves the rule. Another 1960s sitcom, *I Dream of Jeannie*, is a fantasy about a 2,000-year-old genie who falls in love with an American astronaut.

Television viewers like characters who resemble people they might know, but they feel uncomfortable if they think a scriptwriter is making fun of them or of their ethnicity. This is one of the reasons for sitcom characters to be somewhat “distanced” from the viewers. One way of creating this distance is to make the subjects of the sitcom so extreme that viewers will not feel that the script is about them. For example, none of us would worry that if we went to live on a farm we would be as incompetent as were the characters played by Eddie Albert and Eva Gabor in *Green Acres* (1965–1971).

In *Green Acres*, the characters wanted to return to the kind of pleasant life that media portrayed as American farm life. They discovered that it was anything but pleasant. In the 1960s *Beverly Hillbillies*, the characters moved in the opposite direction. When oil was discovered on Jed Clampet’s Ozark farm, the family suddenly became wealthy, which allowed them to move to Beverly Hills in California. Some viewers were offended at the way the humor was based on extreme stereotypes, but most just chuckled as they judged themselves to be “superior.”

One of the first animated sitcoms was *The Flintstones* (1960–1966), a pre-historic family show set in Bedrock. It starred Fred and Wilma Flintstone and their daughter Pebbles. Hanna Barbera created this pioneering show with the catchphrase of “Yabba, dabba, doo!” From 1962 till 1963 and later, from 1986 to 1987, a space-age counterpart, *The Jetsons*, was a science-fiction family sitcom that was popular with children, who especially loved the transportation system and the robots who did the housework.

### Historical Drama

When the controversial and influential *All in the Family* first appeared in the 1970s, it brought attention to middle-class prejudices as revealed through Archie Bunker’s actions and statements. The show was watched by both conservatives and progressives because both were able to see themselves, and also the people who irritated them, in the show. Some critics worried that the program was teaching old prejudices to a new generation instead of eradicating them, but it paved the way for many other family-relationship sitcoms.

There is no end to the careers that could make way for old jokes in new situations, ranging from Mary Tyler Moore’s spin-off from *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (1970–1977) to Tim Allen’s *Home Improvement* (1991–1999) and Tina Fey’s recent *30 Rock*. *The Dick Van Dyke Show* let viewers see what went on behind the scenes, as the writers prepare the scripts for a television sitcom. Other popular career sitcoms take place in a bar (*Cheers*), a psychologist’s

office (*Frasier*), a medical team's tent (*M\*A\*S\*H*), a business (*The Office*), a bureaucratic office (*Parks and Recreation*), a magazine's editorial offices (*Spin City*), a Taxi Cab Company (*Taxi*), and the home of a writer of television jingles (*Two and a Half Men*).

*Roseanne* (1988–1995) was a protest against the “goody-goody” mothers in most family sitcoms. The star has been described as crude, crass, and very blue-collar, a description that also fits *Married with Children*. The long life of the animated *Simpsons* (since 1989) relates to the smart allusions, the up-to-date plots, the appeal to all ages, and the fact that the “actors” are composites of people we actually know. We can also recognize people that we know in the characters of *Golden Girls* (1985–1992), which showed that it is not just young people who can live in a family of “strangers.” In all but one year, the show ranked in the top ten. It starred Bea Arthur, Estelle Getty, and Betty White, who is still performing. We could get some insight into gender roles by comparing *Golden Girls* with today's *The Big Bang Theory*.

There are different kinds of aliens in sitcoms. Lisa on *Green Acres* is one kind of alien because she is a city girl moved to a farm, while Mork from *Mork and Mindy* is a different kind of alien – one from outer space. Robin Williams became famous playing Mork between 1978 and 1982. Alf (1986–1990) is another example of a space alien. Still another kind of alienation is when non-family members are living together. One of the biggest cultural changes of the last few decades has been the increasing number of people living outside of typical blood-related families. This is especially true of young adults, and because they are the audience that advertisers want to woo in hopes of influencing lifetime buying patterns, producers can afford to put big money into shows about independent young people. *Three's Company* (1977–1984) was a ground-breaker because it challenged gender expectations. It would be fun to compare the humor of that show with the current *Big Bang Theory* (2006–2018). And because these shows are about young people, we expect the characters to grow and change – i.e. be “dynamic.” Critic Leo Charney states that *Friends*, *Sex and the City*, and *Mad About You* are dynamic sitcoms because of their long arcs of character evolution and carefully worked-out resolutions. He classifies them as a hybrid between the sitcom and the soap opera because of the way the characters age, change, and grow as they would in real life.

The actors in *Friends* were actually much older than their audiences believed; nevertheless, college students and even teens identified with the lifestyle. *Seinfeld* attracted some of the same audience as did *Friends*, but *Seinfeld* also had adults in the audience and they did not expect as much growth. In literary terms, the characters in *Seinfeld* were “static.” The *Seinfeld* scripts fit into the traditional definition of a sitcom in that the characters are emotionally much the same at the beginning and the end of the shows. The characters in the

Sci-fi sitcom *Futurama* (1999–2013) are aliens, including a robotic android, a one-eyed lady, and a magic frog.

Raunchiness came into some of the sitcoms of the 2000s. For example, because the dysfunctional characters of the Griffin family in *Family Guy* are animated, they are distanced from the audience, and are therefore allowed to be more vulgar than are most real people. Creator Seth MacFarlane is the “voice” of several of the characters. He is also the voice of characters in *South Park* which is even more edgy and more shocking because the lines are spoken by animated “children.” The reason it’s called *South Park* is that the story is set in Canada and the unusual name forces readers to the realization that what seems “very north” to Americans, might be “very south” to Canadians. The unusual name was a clever way to help Americans “cross the border.”

*Everybody Loves Raymond* (2000s) was not as much about a couple and their children as it was about a couple and their parents. Raymond has some of the qualities seen in *Father Knows Best*, but he also has some of the qualities seen in the old funny paper stories of *Blondie and Dagwood*. Because the show was so successful in the United States, it was taken for a trial run in Russia, where it was less than successful. Some reviewers thought that the Russian failure was related to the fact that parents and adult children have a totally different kind of cross-generational tension, and so they missed out on this relatively big part of the humor.

### Current Sitcoms

Currently, the lines between the sitcom, the soap opera, and the TV drama are being blurred as can be seen in *NCIS* (2003–2018). The initials stand for *Naval Criminal Investigation Service*, which is set in Washington, DC. In 2012, *NCIS* was the most popular show on television. We think of it as a drama whose writers have borrowed techniques from sitcoms to make their drama more memorable and popular. An eccentric character who can be counted on for a laugh is Abby Sciuto, the smart Goth girl who works as the forensic specialist and is always sipping “Caff Cows” (large cups of caffeinated soda). This contributes to her being hyperactive. Another character is Dr. Mallard, who lets only his approved co-workers call him “Ducky.” He is laughable in the way he always wears bow ties and talks to the corpses that he is examining. He is often distracted by things or actions that remind him of events that happened earlier in his life. Ziva David, the investigator from Israel, constantly makes amusing errors with English idioms. Anthony DeNozzo (referred to as Tony) is always quoting lines from movies and intentionally mispronouncing other people’s names – especially McGhee’s. A recurring joke is that Jethro Gibbs, “the boss,” always shows up when he is being talked about. A recognizable motif is the way he slaps people on the side of their heads, and when they say

something obvious, he asks, “Ya think?” Still another recurring joke is the way they all throw around the word “proby,” which is a half-insult in that it stands for “probationary.” This is an example of Superiority Humor, because the “proby” has to do all of the scut work. Tony (and his father with the same name) is always chasing women, and McGhee is a non-risk-taking computer nerd who never chases women, but because he has the qualities that women like, they are more attracted to him than to Tony. In summary, sitcoms have been popular since the 1930s, with family stories being the most popular, as the shows began to reflect changing family dynamics. They often feature young adults, who are at interesting points of change in their lives.

### **Folk Humor as History**

Folk humor is another Comic Zeitgeist, which consists of jokes that reveal the spirit of a particular time. One of the values of humor is that it transcends time and place to reveal the universality of the human experience, but there are also connections between the humor that a society creates and cherishes and what is occurring at the moment to affect living conditions and the cultural beliefs and values of the society.

For example, America’s frontier humor created in the 1800s is a unique blend of exaggeration, optimism, creativity, propaganda, and tomfoolery. Mark Twain is the most famous writer to have come out of what was called the frontier of the Old South. Other humorous writers from the same period wrote about similar topics, but some of them used such colloquial language that their stories are almost unreadable today. Stories from the Far West (California, Wyoming, Utah, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas) were even more exaggerated with such heroes as Davy Crockett, who bragged “I can outspoke any man,” and Pecos Bill, whose tombstone is said to read:

Here lies Pecos Bill.  
He always lied, and always will.  
He once lied loud.  
He now lies still.

Foresters and lumbermen in the Midwest made up stories about Paul Bunyan, but they were helped by writer James Stevens who during the 1920s wrote for the Red River Lumber Company, which used the Paul Bunyan character in publicity campaigns. One story was that the Great Lakes are leftovers from the days when Paul would throw chunks of ice into the Great Lakes for his big Blue Ox to retrieve. Another story is that Pecos Bill dug the Rio Grande River because he was “tired of packin’ water from the Gulf of Mexico.” One kind of American Frontier humor was making fun of “greenhorns” (newcomers), who didn’t understand the culture. For example, people laughed at the story of a man

who bought a herd of mules and then gave them away because they wouldn't reproduce. (Mules are the offspring of horses and donkeys and are incapable of reproduction.) They also laughed at the story of a visitor to Texas who was found near death from thirst. He was lying next to a stream with his tongue swollen and bulging from between blistered lips. When his rescuers asked him why he didn't drink from the stream, he croaked, "I didn't have a cup!"

Cowboys joked about their own lack of refinement and culture as when after a trial, a guilty man was hanged, and the witnesses were told that one of them had to go and inform the man's wife. No one wanted to go, so they drew straws. The unlucky man went to the hanged man's cabin and knocked on the door asking "Does the Widow Smith live here?" The woman responded, "I'm Mrs. Smith, but I am not a widow," to which the messenger replied, "I'll bet you ten bucks!"

Another story about poor communication skills, which is at least partially true, came from an 1883 trial in Colorado where Judge M. B. Gerry sentenced Alferd E. Packer to death for cannibalism during a snowstorm in the Colorado mountains. A group of pioneers heading for California was caught in a terrible blizzard, and some of the ones who lived really did eat some of those who died. At the end of the trial, Judge Gerry announced the "guilty" verdict in standard legalese, but the situation was so bizarre that it inspired a reporter to run from the courtroom to the local bar, where he shouted out that the Judge had said, "There were only seven Democrats in all of Hinsdale County and you, you son of a bitch, et [ate] five of them."

This quote was printed in Eastern newspapers and made both Judge Gerry and Alferd E. Packer folklore heroes, so that more than a century later when we went to teach a summer class at the University of Colorado in Boulder, we discovered that the student cafeteria was named the Alferd E. Packer Grill, and in the bookstore students could buy T-shirts bearing the messages "Serving All of Mankind" and "Keep Your Eyes on Your Thighs!"

During World War II in the 1940s, an American soldier, named Bill Mauldin, began drawing cartoons to amuse his barracks mates. His cartoons featured two exhausted and scruffy soldiers named Willie and Joe. When they came to the attention of the editor of the army's *Stars and Stripes* newspaper, Mauldin was promoted to Sergeant and offered a full-time job drawing "Willie and Joe" cartoons. A few generals complained because the soldiers' dress was not up to code, and Willie and Joe certainly did not look like "winners." However, their fellow soldiers loved them for the way they let the folks "back home" see how "tough" life really was. Mauldin was awarded the Pulitzer prize in 1945, and then again in 1959 when as a civilian he was the cartoonist for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.

In more recent times, historian Joseph Boskin, who directed the Urban Studies and Public Policy Program at Boston University, collected and analyzed

jokes from what he called “the cubicles of our culture.” As he explained in his book *Rebellious Laughter* (1997), the jokes he treasured were the ones that people share when they are carpooling, talking on the phone, working out at the gym, riding the subway, or just trying to “get through a day at work.” And because he believed that people make jokes about things that worry them, he felt confident in using jokes as evidence of the underlying tensions of a society.

Some people refer to these kinds of jokes as “survival humor” because they relieve tensions about issues that are difficult to talk about. Other people, like Boskin, use them as evidence of what’s happening in a culture. In *The Humor Prism in 20th Century America* (1997), Boskin looks at the work of Mac E. Barrick who analyzed the Helen Keller jokes that became popular in the 1960s. Their popularity peaked in 1979 when the National Broadcasting Company presented William Gibson’s play *The Miracle Worker*, which told the story of Helen Keller, an American child born in 1880. When Helen was 19 months old, she suffered a serious illness that left her blind, deaf, and mute. The drama of her story came many years later when her specially trained nurse, Annie Sullivan, was able to teach her how to communicate through hand spelling. The presentation on national television of her life-story coincided with the passing of US Public Law 94–142, “The Education for All Handicapped Children Act,” which mandated that physically disabled, blind, and deaf children were to be “mainstreamed” into public schools.

This was a traumatic situation for many parents, who worried that “mainstreaming” would affect the education and the attitudes of their children. They predicted that the new situation would put extra burdens on teachers, and also that their children would be traumatized by the disabilities they would see. Barrick conjectured that parents and, in turn, their children, began relieving their fears and frustrations through sharing “physical-disability humor.” They settled on Helen Keller as a subject for the jokes because her story was well known and had sort of a happy ending. Also, there didn’t happen to be any other well-known public figure who was an amputee or was confined to a wheelchair. She was an ideal subject because she was multiply handicapped and had lived among ordinary people. Jokes about her blindness included references to her “new book,” *Around the Block in 80 Days*, and to how she burned her face “while answering the iron.” Jokes about her use of sign language included:

- What did Helen Keller’s parents do when they caught her swearing?
- They washed her hands with soap.
- Why did Helen Keller fall out of a tree?
- She was yelling for help.

Some scholars have said that the Helen Keller jokes had a positive influence in helping to soften people’s fears, and to lessen the pity that is normally felt toward the disabled. Hence, the jokes actually ended up contributing to the



success of the Handicapped Children Act, because “how can you hate someone who makes you laugh?”

In the 1980s, anthropologist Alan Dundes, along with folklorists Jan Harold Brunvand, Paul Dickson, and Joseph Goulden, collected and published urban legends, which also served as a kind of zeitgeist. An alternate term for “urban legends” was “FOAF tales,” because many of the people who told the stories got them from a “**F**riend **O**f **A** **F**riend” and strongly believed that the stories were true. Dundes would say to such people, “If you know that one of them is true, then please get me the proof; I’d be delighted to have it.” But instead of getting “proof,” he would receive the same basic stories over and over again, but with minor changes in them. It was only gradually as the general public went through the experience of hearing slightly different versions of the same stories, that people came to recognize them as a genre of humor. Here are some of the most popular themes:

- An innocent young driver is forced to figure out how to escape death from a man hiding in the back seat of the car that the lone “victim” is driving.
- A man goes to a hotel with a beautiful sexy woman. After they make passionate love, they fall asleep and the man wakes up alone to find a lipstick message on the mirror, “Welcome to the World of AIDS,” or in another version, the man wakes up in a bathtub filled with bloody water and a note saying that his kidneys have been taken for an organ transplant.
- A young woman wins a trip to Hawaii and not wanting to be embarrassed by how pale she is, goes to several different tanning salons and stays in each one for the maximum amount of time. The story ends with her being in a hospital near death because she had cooked herself from the inside out.
- A man whose job is delivering pre-mixed concrete to construction sites, happens to pass his house one day where he notices a new car in the driveway. He is immediately suspicious that his wife is having an affair. He parks the truck, and sneaks up to his own house where he hears a man talking to his wife. He runs back to his truck, puts it in gear, drives into his driveway, places the truck’s delivery tube spout inside the new car, pushes a button, and releases the whole load of pre-mixed concrete into the new car. Only when it’s too late, does he learn that his wife was buying the new car as a happy surprise for him.

Dickson and Goulden in *There Are Alligators in Our Sewers and Other American Credos* (1983), listed these six features of urban legends:

1. They contain a semblance of seemingly supportive detail.
2. The tellers believe them and pass them on as truth.
3. The stories reflect contemporary fears.
4. They gain momentum from repetition, especially when they find their way into the press.



5. Some of the stories have a grain of truth, which adds immeasurably to their persistence.
6. Formal refutation does nothing to deter the popularity of the fables.

Psychologists and humor scholars ascribed the popularity of the urban legends to the changing living conditions of many Americans, who used to live in small towns or in established neighborhoods where they knew their neighbors and the family backgrounds of practically everyone they dealt with. Now in just a single day, because they have moved to a city, they might interact with more strangers than their parents – or at least, their grandparents – did in a couple of months.

Fears were also increased by such new technologies as microwave ovens, hidden cameras, secret recordings of one's telephone conversations, and of the mysteries behind all of the high-tech medical equipment that has replaced people's yearly visits to the kindly town doctor who managed to get along with just his black bag, a stethoscope, and the little hammer he used to tap people's knees.

A few years ago when Professor Boskin made a presentation to the English Department at our university, some of our students wondered how in today's digitalized world people can distinguish between the "private" jokes that people tell each other and the "public" or commercialized jokes that comedians tell. They wondered if it was even possible because as soon as someone sends a joke to a friend on the Internet, they run the risk of the joke becoming public. A complication is that so many of today's jokes are visual and so even if we see a particular friend every day, we are probably going to send an illustrated joke digitally because of how well the illustration can be reproduced on a computer screen.

Also, many jokes don't have any words at all, which puts more responsibility for interpretation on the receiver. A humor scholar from France, who became a friend of ours through the International Society for Humor Studies, occasionally sends us cartoons that he thinks we can figure out with our limited skills in French. In February of 2016, he sent a video with no words at all. It showed several small groups of adult friends (between three and six individuals) in a variety of pleasant, outdoor settings. In each of the scenarios, a man wearing a long robe and a middle-eastern style head-covering, and carrying a back-pack, walks up to a group, drops his back-pack, and then walks rapidly away. The humor comes from how quickly and how differently the various small groups disband and run away. One man at a park jumps into a duck pond and swims frantically through a group of ducks, while the rest of his group went running in opposite directions.

Both of us received the video on our respective computers, in different rooms of our house, so it wasn't until dinner that evening that we talked about the joke and tried to figure out why it had made each of us feel uncomfortable.

We decided that it was probably because we weren't ready to laugh about terrorism. We would have been more amused at a more trivial problem or at one that could be comfortably placed in the past.

A couple of days later, we got a message from our friend asking how we liked the joke about "the media" working us all into hysterics. We were too embarrassed to confess to him that we hadn't caught on to its humorous message, and actually fell into the category of people who were being made fun of for being alarmists. The experience made us realize how much easier it is for people to become offended at jokes they receive under circumstances that do not allow for immediate feedback based on body language and the twinkle in someone's eye, along with a chance to ask for more details or to discuss the point of view.

Folklorist Elliott Oring says that for listeners to appreciate an ethnic joke they must know enough about the group to catch on quickly and easily, but at the same time they have to have a measure of emotional distance from the subject matter of the humor. If the aspect of a culture that is being disparaged in a joke is the focus of intense emotion, then the communication may be regarded as slander rather than as humor, but on the other hand, a mild sense of discomfort may make the surprise and relief of the joke that much funnier.

In the 1950s when Professor Boskin started collecting jokes, there were only three television channels, and they were heavily censored, as was radio, which meant that there was a definite difference between "public" and "private" humor. And as late as the 1980s, when we held April Fools' Day humor conferences at our university, there were usually a couple of scholars who presented papers telling how they had "tracked" the spread of some "private" joke. These were jokes that were too offensive to have been shared on radio or television, or even to have been presented orally in comedy clubs. One theory was that New York stockbrokers, who at that time did most of their selling through telephone calls, were responsible for spreading "private" jokes around the country because they would "warm up" their clients by telling the latest jokes that they had heard.

A sad example of this kind of "private" joking is the way that just a few months after the Challenger disaster – in which seven American astronauts lost their lives in an explosion only minutes after take-off – "gallows" jokes were being whispered around the United States – and maybe even around the world. This terrible event occurred before a worldwide television audience on January 28, 1986. Many older adults were reminded of the tragedy because of various memorial services that were held on its thirtieth anniversary, January 28, 2016. Some of us who were studying humor thirty years ago, were reminded of the "gallows humor" riddles that we had never shared in any public way – unless including them in this chapter counts as a public presentation. But shown by

the fact that thirty years after the tragedy, they were still tucked away in the “censored” part of our minds reveals their power.

What does NASA stand for?

– Need Another Seven Astronauts!

What was the last question Christa McAuliffe asked?

What’s this button for?

And,

What color were Christa McAuliffe’s eyes?

– Blue – One blew East and one blew west!

Christa McAuliffe was the focus of the most attention because she was an attractive, 38-year-old school teacher who had competed in a contest to become the first teacher-in-space. As a way of getting a new generation interested in space exploration, she had been scheduled to make televised presentations to school classrooms, many of which were tuned into the televised launching as a way of interesting a new generation in space exploration.

Today there are so many more comedians working on television and producing Internet comedy shows of their own that our students wondered if the only “real” difference between “public” and “private” joking is that people have developed their own internal “censors,” so they won’t put jokes on the Internet that will get them in trouble. Also, a complication related to today’s humor is that so much of it is based on photos, which from a practical standpoint are much better shared in full color on a computer screen than on the tiny little screen of a cell phone.

### Points of Departure

1. The paragraph below tells the complex story of how shortly after World War II, the popular and charismatic General Douglas MacArthur was campaigning for a preemptive invasion of the People’s Republic of China. He refused to listen to President Truman and to other military leaders who thought that such an act was, at best, unnecessary, and at worst, probably suicidal. There was some awkwardness in the way that President Truman went about firing the General, but in hindsight, military leaders agreed that President Truman had done the right thing. Several months after MacArthur was fired from his position as Commander in Chief, he returned to the United States where he was highly honored throughout the country. One of things he is quoted as saying in his first major speech

was “Old soldiers never die; they just fade away!” As it was repeated in news stories, and on the radio, the statement caught the fancy of the American public and people began creating parodies; a few of which are listed below. When we first started making presentations to senior citizen groups, we happened to mention this old joke, and were surprised at how many parodies these people who had lived through the situation remembered. Here are some of them. As you read them, decide which ones “make sense” as they are spelled and which ones are actually “jokes” or puns because the supplied word as it is spelled does not fit the semantic sense. For example, the first one “Old teachers never die; they just lose their principles,” is a joke because the word for the *principal* of a school is spelled “principal.” Alleen remembers her fourth-grade teacher explaining that all we needed to know for our upcoming spelling test was that “The principal of our school is our *pal*.”

Old teachers never die; they just lose their principles.  
 Old athletes never die; they just lose their supporters.  
 Old robbers never die; they just steal away.  
 Old blondes never fade; they just dye away.  
 Old lawyers never die; they just lose their appeal.  
 Old bankers never die; they just lose their interest.  
 Old doctors never die; they just lose their patience.  
 Old photographers never die; they just stop developing.

2. Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) wrote *The Divine Comedy*, which is not very funny. It is about “Paradiso” as contrasted with “Purgatorio” and the “Inferno.” It was called a “comedy” because it is a story about the powerless vs. the powerful, or the little man vs. the big man, or even about the perils and pitfalls of social pretense. Thus, *The Divine Comedy* was a “comedy” only in the classical sense that it didn’t have a tragic ending. We call these fights “David and Goliath” stories in which “David” is always supposed to win.
  - (a) Can you think of other “David and Goliath” stories?
  - (b) If so, are these stories humorous?
  - (c) Are they ironic?
3. Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375) wrote *The Decameron*, which was a collection of stories told by ten nobles who had fled the Black Death by shutting themselves up in a castle. Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* were influenced by Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, and they have the same episodic structure. These *Canterbury Tales* were bawdy

and suggestive and very funny, and they were also episodic in the sense that each tale was an episode in the continuing journey. Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer* are also episodic.

- (a) Can you think of other episodic novels? Explain.
  - (b) In your examples, are there social interactions between characters who have different backgrounds and life experiences? Explain.
4. François Rabelais (c. 1483–1553) wrote a series of five books collectively known as *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Gargantua and his son Pantagruel were two giants who could change sizes. They could sometimes fit into a normal building, but at other times they could hold whole civilizations inside of their mouths. Rabelais' brand of silliness and freedom from the laws of physics and logic were considered by the critic Bakhtin to be part of the "carnival" world. Can you think of other characters that are so exaggerated that they might be part of the "carnival world"?
5. Jonathan Swift (1667–1745) is most famous for his *Gulliver's Travels*, a satiric novel reflecting various failings of British culture. But Swift also wrote *A Modest Proposal*, an essay that suggested that the problems of overpopulation and starvation of the lower classes (especially those in Ireland) could be easily solved if parents would prepare and eat their own children. Compare this over-the-top exaggeration to Mark Twain's *War Prayer*. When such satires are so over-the-top and bitter, are they still humorous? Explain.

## 11 Journalism

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Within fairly recent history, humans have seen several real-life developments that have made humor and laughter an increasingly important part of what for the past 175 years we have called “journalism.” Technical developments include better and less expensive printing presses, which resulted in a greater percentage of the population having books, magazines, and newspapers to read, as well as wide access to radio and television programs, a wide variety of films, and many kinds of cameras and recording equipment that are brought into play on the Internet.

“Ethics and Standards” are part of the code for journalists. Like doctors, journalists should do no harm, and they should not become part of the story. Journalists should also not discriminate on the basis of race, religion, sexual orientation, or disabilities (either physical or mental), and they should not violate libel or slander laws. Many news organizations maintain an in-house Ombudsman, whose role is to keep the news organization honest and accountable to the public. However, the individual reporters and writers also need to meet the following standards:

- Be as accurate as possible given time and space constraints.
- If you are told something by only one person, attribute it to that person, but if an event has two or more independent eyewitnesses, it can be reported as a fact.
- If possible, try to get independent fact-checking by another reporter.
- Publish “corrections” whenever errors are discovered.
- If a defendant has not yet been convicted of a crime, or if the reporter is not sure of the details, use the term “allegedly” to communicate the uncertainties of the case.
- And when reporting surveys and statistical information, identify the source of the statistics and indicate how confident you feel about the accuracy of the conclusions.

### **Spin in Today’s Political News**

In the digital world, where we have many choices for getting our news, we tend to select those places that are most comfortable for us, and these are the places

that reinforce our biases, whether conservative or progressive. Spinning a story consists of reframing, repositioning, or otherwise modifying the perception of an issue or an event, as when a cameraman focuses on a non-typical signboard or on a small group of participants whose message is not representative of the crowd. The term “spin” comes from an old American farming expression, “to spin a yarn.” As women were using their spinning wheels to make sheep’s wool into thread, people would tell stories (spin yarns), so the term “yarn” meant “tall tale,” and “spin” meant “to tell a story in a dramatic or self-serving way.” Later, the public relations advisors, pollsters, and media consultants who omitted certain details, and fabricated other details, became known as “spin doctors” or “spinmeisters.”

Here are some of the techniques that spin doctors use, as outlined in Wikipedia’s “Journalism Ethics and Standards” page (downloaded July 1, 2017). Notice how much they resemble the techniques of high-pressure salespeople.

- They cherry-pick the facts so as to slant their story in the direction that will make their interpretation sound “great” while making the opposing viewpoint(s) sound terrible.
- They use “non-denial” denials, which means they focus on a lesser problem or they deny there is a problem by saying such things as “I’ve already answered that question,” or “I’ll get back to you on that,” or “My opponent did something worse,” or “Everybody does it.”
- They use the non-apology apology, by apologizing for a lesser problem or changing the subject to talk about mitigating circumstances.
- They use distancing language; for example, by saying that “Mistakes were made,” or by spinning away to another topic, or using such terms as “unidentified sources” or “unproven claims” to discredit the question and the questioner.

Such news is truly bad when it is intentionally designed to deceive people and to disrupt the political system, as when deliberate misinformation or hoaxes are spread via newspapers, magazines, radio, television, blogs, social media, etc. However, people also need to understand the system well enough to distinguish between intentional hoaxes and the satires and parodies such as those published in *The Onion*, which is a magazine designed to entertain, but not to deceive or disrupt the system. A few years ago, we read about the Florida State exam for graduating high school seniors, which included a satire piece first published in *The Onion*, which in the late 1960s and 1970s was a primary source of humor. Whoever made up the exam was probably a middle-aged adult, with fond memories of the magazine. But today’s high school students were not acquainted with this time period because it was too new to be put in their history textbooks and was too old for them to have experienced. Also, they probably didn’t look at the name of where



the piece was originally published, or if they did, they did not know that the magazine was satirical. So many of the students wrongly interpreted it as fake news and gave such inappropriate answers that the testing service decided to delete this part of the exam and to re-figure all of the students' scores.

In her *First Draft News*, Claire Wardle, former Research Director at the Tow Center at Columbia Journalism School identifies seven different characteristics that readers can use to distinguish between “fake news” and “satire or parody.”

- Satire or Parody may intend to “fool” someone but doesn’t intend to harm someone or disrupt the system.
- False Connections are when the headlines or the captions don’t support the content.
- Misleading Content is when the information used to frame an issue or an individual is misleading.
- False Content is when genuine content is mixed with false content to give the false content more credibility.
- Imposter Content is when there are false sources, or when true sources are impersonated (i.e. they are true sources, but they are not associated with this content).
- Manipulated Content is when the true information is manipulated by context or a photo (often “doctored”) so that it will be misread or misheard.
- Fabricated Content is when the story is totally false, and has been fabricated in order to deceive and to do harm.

We are accustomed to think of journalists mainly in relation to delivering real news stories, but from the very beginning of the United States, newspapers also included humor and occasional cartoons. The most famous of these early cartoons is the one that Benjamin Franklin drew in 1754 when there were rumors of the American colonists having a possible war with France. He drew a picture of a snake cut into parts. He labeled the head “New England” and put the initials of the other colonies on the other parts. The caption “Unite or Die” became a rallying cry for those wanting a federal government as opposed to independent colonies. The cartoon was still in use twenty-two years later, when again the Americans were deciding whether to stay as a colony or go out on their own, but this time the decision was whether to separate from England.

Benjamin Franklin is the first of America’s journalists to be prominently remembered in the history books. We know he planned on being remembered because in one of his advice pieces, he wrote: “If you would not be forgotten as soon as you are dead and rotten, either write things worth reading or do things worth the writing.” As a teenager, he had already written and published *Poor*

*Richard’s Almanac*, which he updated annually for some twenty-five years. It included such witticisms as

Three may keep a secret if two of them are dead.  
 Fish and visitors stink in three days.  
 Keep your eyes wide open before marriage, half-shut afterward.

One of his more serious bits of advice, which is especially relevant to this chapter, is “A Bible and a newspaper in every house, a good school in every district – all studied and appreciated as they merit – are the principal support of virtue, morality, and civil liberty.” In support of his ideas about public education, when he became the first Postmaster General he established a system that enabled publishers to distribute their magazines and newspapers through the US postal system either for free or at a greatly reduced cost.

### **The Legacy of “The Yellow Kid”**

On 17th February 1895, a new cartoon figure drawn by Richard F. Outcault made his appearance in a Sunday supplement to Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World*. The comic strip was called *Hogan’s Alley*, but was soon changed to *The Yellow Kid* because the publisher, Joseph Pulitzer, had purchased a newly designed printing machine which was supposed to print in color. Actually the colors ran together on newsprint, so it was impossible to print the great paintings he had planned on printing and then having his editorial writers explain to the public. But then a foreman in the print shop had the idea of using the machine to color the night shirt worn by the little boy that was featured in the *Hogan’s Alley* comic strip. Since the color yellow seemed to hold best, the man who drew the cartoon decided that it would be best to put the yellow color on the boy’s nightshirt and name the strip “The Yellow Kid.” This was a long way from having a “full color” comic strip, but it was extraordinary for the times.

Today when we look at reproductions from the comic strip, we are likely to think of “The Kid” as almost a baby because he was barefoot and bald-headed, but Richard F. Outcault, the creator, explained that both the bare feet and the bald head related to poverty. Poor children in early New York often went without shoes and their parents shaved their heads to prevent head lice. These children often wore leftover hand-me-downs that were too big. And by dressing him in a nightshirt, Outcault provided himself with what served as a “billboard” for those messages that he wanted to communicate, but that didn’t seem to fit into a normal conversation. In a 1902 interview with Outcault which is reprinted on Wikipedia’s “The Yellow Kid” page, the artist explained:

The Yellow Kid was not an individual but a type. When I used to go about the slums on newspaper assignments I would encounter him often, wandering out of doorways or

sitting down on dirty doorsteps. I always loved the Kid. He had a sweet character and a sunny disposition, and was generous to a fault. Malice, envy, or selfishness were not traits of his, and he never lost his temper.

A year later, the creator of the cartoon, Richard Outcault, was hired away by William Randolph Hearst, the owner of the *New York Journal*, which was the “other” big newspaper in New York City. Hearst also bought a color printer, so that he could keep *The Yellow Kid* yellow. The *New York Journal* and the *New York World* were savage competitors and their reporters were always trying to “scoop” the other paper. Their behavior gave rise to the phrase “yellow journalism” since the most outstanding thing about the papers was the now-famous “Yellow Kid.” But today when we refer to *yellow journalism*, we are accusing a news outlet of being less than honest in the way it reports the news.

Our *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (Tenth Edition) defines *journalism* as a noun coming into the language in 1833 with the meaning of “the collection and editing of news for presentation through the media or the public press.” It dates the word “journalist” to 1693 and gives the definition as “a person engaged in journalism, esp. a writer or editor for a news medium, i.e. a mass audience,” and then finally as “a person who keeps a journal.” The association of the word *journal* with keeping a daily record may have contributed to its connection with the idea of “daily” newspapers.

According to the American Press Institute, “The journalist places the public good above all else and uses certain methods – the foundation of which is a discipline of verification – to gather and assess what he or she finds.” Here at Arizona State University we have the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication. The school is a fairly new addition to our university, but people all over the world recognize Walter Cronkite’s name because for many years he was an outstanding television presenter of the evening news. Many students from both inside and outside of the United States apply to come to “the Cronkite School.” When we were checking the Cronkite School name against other Journalism Schools, we discovered that many colleges have fairly recently added the word *Broadcast* to their names. Their program descriptions start with something like, “Become a broadcast journalist...” Here, the word *broadcast* puts more emphasis on the idea of *presenting* the news, rather than on the earlier idea of *finding* and *verifying* the truth of what has been learned.

### Changing Times in Journalism

Throughout the early history of the United States, Americans loved reading the newspaper, but in the late 1940s and 1950s, the percentage of people regularly reading newspapers began to drop because more people were listening to their radios and later began watching television. But even though a smaller percentage of people were reading newspapers in the United States, there was

an increase in the number of households, so that by 1970, newspaper reading had reached a new peak, with 62 million newspapers being sold every day. But over the last forty-five years, the number of people reading newspapers has continued to drop.

Many more people began to rely on television for their news and entertainment. Alleen had an experience in the 1980s that brought this home to her. At our local library, she had prepared a special display featuring the “best books” for children. The *Arizona Republic*, our State’s main daily newspaper, was going to do a story about the display and asked Alleen to bring in a couple of children to pose with the display. While they were setting things up, Alleen cheerfully told the 6-year-old boy that his picture was going to be in the newspaper. His disappointed response was, “Won’t it be on TV?”

When she said “No, it’s a newspaper picture,” the boy was so disappointed that the librarian, the photographer, and Alleen had to work really hard to get the smile back on his face.

As newspaper sales went down, many metropolitan areas which had relied on both morning and afternoon newspapers cancelled their late afternoon papers. However, one of the things that kept newspapers in business was the popularity of what was known as “The Funnies” or the “Funny Papers” for children. In the homes where children lived, it was not at all unusual on Sunday mornings for the children in a family to grab the over-sized sheets of newsprint, to spread them out on the floor, and to crowd around to see what was happening with *Little Orphan Annie*, *Dick Tracy*, and *Popeye*. Adults probably looked at the headlines first, but soon afterwards opened the first page of their paper so they could see the political cartoon that was put in the favored spot, at the top of page 3 so that it would be the first thing looked at when the paper was opened.

Here in Arizona, we had the Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist, Reg Manning, who died in 1986. Between 1948 and 1971, he was the cartoonist for the *Arizona Republic*. Alongside his signature, he often drew an anthropomorphic cactus with a big nose. It is on the cover of his book *What Kinda Cactus Izzat?* which has been reprinted numerous times because most of the people who live in Arizona haven’t the slightest idea of the names of our various plants. The joke is that no one ever buys just one copy of the book, because we need to have a supply for whoever might come to visit us from out-of-state. The only art training that Manning had was while he was in high school. His cartoons, many of which had some identifying mark that they were coming from the “Wild West,” were syndicated in 170 newspapers.

### **Erma Bombeck and Art Buchwald**

While we were teaching here at Arizona State University, our university awarded honorary doctorates to two famous newspaper columnists who

specialized in humor. They are Erma Bombeck, who was born in 1927 and died in 1996, and Art Buchwald, who was born in 1925 and died in 2007. In their life stories, as well as in the subjects they wrote about, they probably could not have been more different from each other. Nevertheless, they were both loved for the humorous touches that they added to daily newspapers across the United States. Buchwald was nationally syndicated in over 500 newspapers, while at her peak, Bombeck was nationally syndicated in some 900 national newspapers. Bombeck's focus was on the frustrations of being a housewife, but she really started her career when she was in high school, and worked at the *Dayton* (Ohio) *Herald* as a copygirl. She was a proof reader and occasionally she was asked to write an obituary, but her first piece of real journalism was an interview with Shirley Temple, who happened to visit Dayton. Erma later enrolled in the University of Dayton, and worked at a department store where she occasionally wrote humorous material for the company's newsletter. She married Bill Bombeck, who was a veteran of the Korean War and was training to be an educator and school supervisor.

Between 1954 and 1964, Erma was basically a housewife, but she did write a few humorous columns for the *Dayton Shopping News*. Because she had been diagnosed with a severe birth defect in her kidneys, she thought she could never have children and so she and her husband adopted a baby girl in 1953; however a few years later, Erma gave birth to two sons, one in 1955 and one in 1958. In 1965, Erma resumed her writing career for the *Kettering-Oakwood Times*, where she wrote weekly columns and was paid \$3.00 for each one. The same year, the *Dayton Journal Herald* requested two weekly 450-word columns for \$50.00. It took only three weeks for her Dayton column to go into syndication, and within a few years, 900 US newspapers were publishing Bombeck's columns. They were mostly humorous accounts of the lives of typical American housewives. No one had done this before in such a consistent way. She also had articles published in *Good Housekeeping* magazine, *Reader's Digest*, *Family Circus*, *Redbook*, *McCall's*, and *Teen* magazine. She became a well-known speaker, still relying on her sense of humor. One of her speeches happened to be in Phoenix, Arizona. It was in the spring, when Arizona's warm weather appears absolutely "heavenly" to people coming from a bad winter in the East or Midwest.

Erma went home and convinced her family that they should move to Phoenix. In 1971, the family moved from their tract home in Centerville, Ohio (a house that is now on the National Register of Historic Places) into a custom-built house on a hilltop in Paradise Valley, a suburb of Phoenix. Her husband was hired as a principal of one of our local high schools, and she entered into a 25-year period of heavy writing and public speaking. Everyone assumed that she had brought her family to Paradise Valley so the family could enjoy the luxury of their new home and new schools for the children. In retrospect however,

Alleen wonders if Erma knew that her health was failing and she was hoping that a warm and dry climate might help.

According to a Wikipedia write-up, for years she had undergone daily dialysis treatments while keeping her health problems secret. Even when she went into the hospital for a kidney transplant in 1996, none of us in the general public knew how sick she really was. Alleen remembers teaching an early morning class and seeing one of her best friends waiting outside the classroom door for her. It was near the end of the class, and so Alleen dismissed the students and went out to see why her friend was standing there looking so upset. All that her friend could say before she started sobbing was, “Erma died!”

It took Alleen a while to catch on that her friend was talking about Erma Bombeck, because Alleen hadn’t even heard that Erma (this is what everyone on campus called her) was going into a hospital for surgery. However, by lunchtime, every woman that Alleen met had stopped her to share the sad news about their “friend” Erma. Even people who had never read her books, which are mostly compilations of her newspaper columns, rushed out to buy the books or to ask their friends for borrowing privileges, starting with *At Wit’s End* (1967), *Just Wait Until You Have Children of Your Own* (co-authored with Bil Keane, 1971), *I Lost Everything in the Post-Natal Depression* (1974), *The Grass Is Always Greener Over the Septic Tank* (1976), *If Life Is a Bowl of Cherries, What Am I Doing in the Pits?* (1978), *Aunt Erma’s Cope Book* (1979), *Motherhood: The Second Oldest Profession* (1983), and *Family – The Ties That Bind ... and Gag!* (1987).

These clever titles are just a hint of Bombeck’s humor, which came from the viewpoint of a surprised and frustrated housewife who was sharing with the world the challenges of being a successful American wife and mother. Early in her career, some feminists thought Erma was glorifying the role of housewives, but they soon discovered that “No!” she was making fun of many aspects of the daily frustrations that mothers experienced. Many feminists became her most ardent fans because they appreciated her informality and her resistance to “stuffiness.” Even at our formal graduation ceremony where she was presented with an Honorary Doctorate, she made the audience laugh by asking the University President if she could possibly trade it in for a campus parking permit.

When we recommended that Art Buchwald be granted an Honorary Doctorate in appreciation for the help he had given us in founding the International Society for Humor Studies, a whole different group of fans participated in campus events designed to honor him, which included a dinner at the University President’s home. The way he helped found the International Society for Humor Studies is that we happened to read a news clipping that said he was coming to Scottsdale (a suburb of Phoenix fairly close to our University), and we wrote to ask him if he would be willing to visit to meet with a few faculty members who were interested in sponsoring a humor conference. He wrote

back to say that of course he would be happy to meet with us, so we arranged a luncheon for something like eight of our favorite faculty members, each of whom had done something to illustrate their interest in humor. Alleen stayed at the ASU Memorial Union having lunch with these faculty members, while Don drove out to Scottsdale to find Mr. Buchwald. This was before cars had GPS systems, and Alleen was really nervous; first that Don would never find the hotel where Buchwald was speaking, and second, that if he did find Mr. Buchwald he wouldn't be able to find a parking place close to the Memorial Union where the lunch was held.

Happily, neither of these fears came true, and Buchwald really did give us good advice. He cautioned that we should not plan on having people come and laugh solidly for three days. "That's impossible!" he said. "Laughter has to be spontaneous and come with little surprises spread across time." We didn't know how valuable this advice was until a few months later when we held our first of six annual conferences. How we followed his advice was to have different sessions for different people so that we didn't expect all the visitors to attend each session. For example, on Sunday afternoon we invited parents to bring their children to hear presentations by authors of humorous books. We arranged for faculty members to be the hosts for some sessions and to help our visitors get out of town to see places like Oak Creek Canyon, the Phoenix Zoo, and other tourist attractions. We couldn't afford to bring Buchwald to one of our Humor conferences, but he did come back to our campus when the University decided to honor him with an Honorary Doctorate.

Buchwald's humor was totally different from Bombeck's, just as his life had been totally different. He was born to an Austrian-Hungarian Jewish immigrant family and was the youngest of four children. His mother was institutionalized for mental illness and as a young child, he was placed in the Hebrew Orphan Asylum in New York City, and then in several foster homes and finally in a children's hospital because he had rickets. He went to Jamaica High School, but before graduation he ran away and joined the Marines. Because he was too young to officially join, he hired "a drunk" to be his "official guardian" and sign the necessary permission forms for him to join the Marines. He spent two out of his three years in the Pacific Theater where he was promoted to Sergeant. We know that at the time he was already interested in humor, because he later observed that "In the Marines, they don't have much use for humorists, they beat my brains in."

When the war was over, he used the G. I. Bill to pay for enrollment at the University of Southern California. They wouldn't let him graduate, because he didn't have a high school degree, but they nevertheless let him manage the campus magazine *Wampus*. He also wrote a humorous column for the college newspaper, the *Daily Trojan*. He left USC in 1949, after buying himself a one-way ticket to Paris. Once in France, he immediately went to the offices of the European edition of the *New York Herald Tribune* and asked for a job. He had



brought with him a writing sample entitled “Paris after Dark.” It was filled with scraps of offbeat information about Parisian nightlife. They hired him to be part of the staff and he continued writing pieces for a column entitled “Paris after Dark.” Then in 1951, he started a new column “Mostly about People.” Readers liked his style and his two columns were soon brought together under the title “Europe’s Lighter Side.” One of his most famous pieces was an explanation of the American holiday of Thanksgiving in which he used garbled French translations (e.g. he wrote the name of Miles Standish as *Kilometres Deboutish*) to explain the American holiday of Thanksgiving to the French. Buchwald – as well as many readers – considered it his funniest column, and it was traditionally re-run every Thanksgiving holiday until Buchwald’s death in 2007.

His visit to ASU to receive his honorary doctorate was totally different from when Erma Bombeck came and jokingly asked if she could trade in her prestigious-looking “Honorary Degree” certificate for an on-campus parking permit. When ASU’s own journalism students were invited to meet with Buchwald, one of the students asked him if he didn’t feel bad about getting his honorary degree at the Winter graduation rather than at the Spring graduation, when there would be many more people. Buchwald’s immediate response was something like, “Goodness NO! You have it all wrong. This year with me speaking there will be so many people attending graduation that some of you students probably won’t even get a seat!”

### **The Web vs. Newsprint**

Many people assume that newspapers are just moving over to the web so that people can go online for whatever they used to get in a newspaper. Actually, this is far from true. Of course some things are much better if we get them online; print and pictures can be enlarged, and may be in color. For example, a friend recently forwarded ten online photos of a smiling Queen Elizabeth posing alongside ten American Presidents. In photo number 1, she was standing next to President Barack Obama, then in photo number 2, next to George W. Bush, and so on through Presidents Bill Clinton, George H. W. Bush, Ronald Reagan, Jimmy Carter, Gerald Ford, Richard Nixon, John F. Kennedy, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and Harry Truman. The website was entitled, “The Stability of Kingdoms and Queendoms.”

The personal message from the woman who forwarded it read, “I don’t know about you, but I went OMG somewhere between Eisenhower and Truman.” Then she added a P. S. “If you remember all or most of these Presidents, you’re no spring chicken either!” We smiled at this because most of the pictures were in color and each one filled our screen so that we had good, clear pictures.

In our first Honors College class at ASU, one of the biggest show-and-tell laughs came from a selfie supposedly sent that morning by an American father



who was on a business trip to Tokyo. The student who had come early and posted the photo on our in-class screen, explained that he had received it from his Dad that morning. The day before, his Dad had left on a business trip to Japan, and he and his mother had asked his Dad to send them a picture from his hotel window so they could have an image of him in Japan. We were charmed by the photo of a fatherly looking man in a high-rise hotel room, holding a camera at arm's length so he could take a selfie while standing with his back to a large picture window. Then as we all looked a little closer, we broke out laughing because there at the side of the window was the famous Japanese Godzilla monster getting ready to push through the window. Our clever student had just found the picture somewhere online and then totally made up the story about it being a picture sent by his father.

### **Obituaries: Newspapers vs. Online Stories**

The first day we taught the humor class in ASU's Honors College, we brought in over 100 humor-related clippings from newspapers and magazines that we had cut out over the last few months. We spread them out on the tables where the students were sitting and encouraged them to glance through the clippings and find one to share with the class. We also said that they could take any of the clippings that might help them get interested in a research topic related to humor.

We were disappointed after class to see that most of the clippings – and virtually all of the ones that were about celebrities' deaths – had been left on the tables. Some of the clippings we brought in were obituary articles written by professional journalists for national magazines or newspapers, rather than the smaller kinds of "death notices" written by family members and published usually for a fee in local newspapers.

A decade ago, we became aware of this major difference in obituaries when a former student came by to talk with us about how she could get a teaching certificate. She had graduated in journalism from our Walter Cronkite School and then had taken a job writing obituaries for our local newspaper. She explained that she had chosen to work in the obituary department because of the job security related to the fact that "People surely aren't going to stop dying."

But sadly after only a couple of years, the newspaper decided to change its practice and publish whatever family members turned in. Contributors were charged a fee according to how long the obituary was and whether or not a photo was to be included. Of course the newspaper maintained a right of rejection in case a family member wrote something truly outlandish. The paper also had an employee check with local mortuaries to verify the death. However, these clerical jobs were not at the pay level our ASU graduate expected.

We thought of this woman's sad experiences with obituaries when not a single student in our class picked up or read any of the obituary clippings that we had laid out. We concluded that death must be a subject too far removed from

young adults to be of interest. But a few weeks into the semester, media stories began appearing related to the one-year anniversary of Steve Jobs' death on October 5, 2011. The media was filled with jokes and cartoons that over the intervening year had been created and polished and could now be viewed as humor. Our students especially appreciated the witticism:

Ten years ago the USA had Steve Jobs, Bob Hope, and Johnny Cash ...  
Now there's No Jobs, No Hope, and No Cash.

They also laughed at David Fitzsimmons' drawing from the *Arizona Daily Star*. It showed Steve Jobs – complete with halo and wings – holding a harp and asking:

When is the last time this device was upgraded? It really needs to be more user-friendly. Who's in charge of innovation up here? Is this available in other colors?

Another favorite showed Jobs dressed in his typical jeans and turtleneck, talking to an older angel dressed in a white robe. The student who presented the cartoon to the class referred to the angel figure as "The God Dude." He was bringing Steve Jobs to meet Moses – who was still carrying the Ten Commandments – one stone under each arm. The "God-Dude" was saying to Moses, "Meet Steve. He's gonna upgrade your tablets."

Our students were surprised to learn that obituary cartoons are usually prepared way ahead of time because as soon as a celebrity shows some signs of illness or just plain old age, cartoonists go to work gathering ideas and making tentative sketches. A cartoonist who spoke at one of our humor conferences told us that obituary cartoons are favorites with readers – newspapers nearly always get letters of appreciation for them – probably because they help to bring closure, along with a smile, to sad situations. However, cartoonists seldom feel good about drawing obituary cartoons because they have trained themselves to look at opposing sides of an issue and to take a "surprisingly different" point of view. There aren't that many angles from which to view death because deep in our subconscious most of us are afraid of death and so we reverently go along with the adage of not speaking ill of the dead. This means that when "honoring" someone who has died, cartoonists have to rein in the inclination toward hostile wit, unless they are joking about someone like Adolph Hitler.

We have been reading obituaries in our local newspaper for years and have found only two examples of attempted humor in the small obituaries that family members turn in. In one, the family wrote that their mother loved to shop and always bought more things than she could use. They finished the obituary with, "If you want something as a remembrance of Mom, just stop by in a few days and choose your gift. It will probably still be in its original Dollar Store bag with the price tag attached." The other one simply told about how "Dad was always smiling and always had a perfect story for every occasion."

In contrast, we regularly see humor in the much longer obituaries that are professionally written for celebrities. For example, when Gene Wilder died in September of 2016, the editor of *The Week* wrote that Wilder began performing at a young age and then explained that “After his mother suffered a heart attack, a doctor warned the 8-year-old Wilder not to argue with his mom because it might kill her. So he devised comedy skits to make her laugh instead.”

When Zsa Zsa Gabor died in December of 2016, Ronald Bergan wrote for the *Guardian* that Gabor was the embodiment of the phrase “famous for being famous.” She had married nine times and had one of the best collections of diamonds in the world. Her explanation was that “I don’t believe in living in sin, so always got married.”

When Mary Tyler Moore died in January of 2017, Virginia Heffernan wrote in the *New York Times* that Moore’s “witty and graceful performance on two top-rated television shows in the 1960s and 1970s helped define a new vision of American womanhood.” Her influence can be seen in the performances of almost all the female sitcom stars who followed her, from Jennifer Aniston to Debra Messing to Tina Fey, who has said that she developed her acclaimed sitcom *30 Rock*, and her character of the harried television writer Liz Lemon, by watching episodes of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*.

Of course nobody reads the obituary page of a newspaper hoping to be amused, but still it is interesting to see how much more memorable, and at the same time more respectful, well-written obituaries can be. Just recently (starting in 2018), our local paper, the *Arizona Republic*, apparently developed a new approach to obituaries. Previously, all the obituaries were printed in type that was much smaller than the regular news items. They differed in size from something like two column inches, to maybe seven or eight column inches if the deceased had been a local celebrity. But sometimes if there were only two or three such notices, they would be crowded into a lower corner amidst miscellaneous, small advertisements.

But now for at least the last few months, the obituaries have been given plenty of space. In the most recent Sunday edition, five-and-a-half pages were devoted to obituaries. The type was slightly bigger, instead of being slightly smaller, than in the rest of the paper, and there were plenty of pictures. Our first thought was to give three cheers because it now looks like all of us “regular people” will be able to get a “celebrity obituary.” If the paper continues with this new feature, maybe at the university we can add a couple of lessons in our composition classes on the “Writing of Obituaries.” Cynics are likely to complain that it’s just because all the real news comes online so that newspapers are now scrambling to fill their pages. Maybe so, but the next time we teach a composition class we are going to include a couple of lessons on the writing of obituaries and how it can be perfectly acceptable to add the kinds of humorous details that will make for an interesting obituary. And really, everyone deserves a celebrity obituary printed on real paper that can be saved and put in family scrapbooks.

### Points of Departure

1. Explain how humor is used in a local newspaper, bulletin, or newsletter. Bring in an example to share with the class. As you tell the class about it, show how it contains one or more of the following characteristics, or maybe another technique that we didn't think to list. Also, try to describe the intended audience and how the creator took that into account:

Irony

Paradox

Parody

Sarcasm

Visual Imagery

Wordplay

2. Here is an alphabetical list of currently popular hosts or performers on what is usually referred to as "Late Night Television." This is a relatively new kind of program that many people look forward to watching every evening. Most of the programs include current news, along with humor. Choose one of them to watch and to learn about his or her style and techniques. If the person is really presenting "news," how do they incorporate humor? Or if the person is basically a comedian, how do they bring in news? These performers change regularly, so you are welcome to also talk about someone who has recently been added to the list.

Samantha Bee

Rachel Maddow

Stephen Colbert

Bill Maher

Jimmy Fallon

Trevor Noah

Jimmy Kimmel

John Oliver

Jay Leno

John Stewart

3. Take a look at a current issue of a magazine or a newspaper, and make a list of the ways that the editor, or maybe one of his or her assistants, has made humor-related decisions. We all know that editors choose the artists who create the editorial cartoons, as well as the comic strips, and perhaps additional little features such as the Dilbert cartoons, which are usually published on one of the business pages. Editors also choose the regular columnists to decide if they want writers with humorous tendencies, as when Erma Bombeck wrote her columns about family and household issues and Art Buchwald wrote his columns about politics, while "Dear Abby" (now her daughter) writes her column in the form of answers to people who send in letters asking for advice.

“When is it legal to laugh?” became a question in the news on January 10, 2017 when a public hearing was being held in Washington DC to evaluate the qualifications of Jeff Sessions to become the Attorney General of the United States. About two dozen members of a protest group called “Code Pink” were in the audience. One of them was a 61-year-old woman named Desiree Fairouz. She was dressed in a pink costume that vaguely resembled the Statue of Liberty. Two other members of the protest group were dressed in white hoods and robes to appear like Ku Klux Klan members. They wanted to remind people of an earlier comment that Sessions had made about the Klan, which he later claimed to be a joke. Both of these protesters were arrested and escorted from the room before the hearing began.

Ms. Fairouz sat quietly with the remaining protesters, but midway through, when Senator Richard C. Shelby (R-Ala.) stated that Sessions’ record of “treating all Americans equally under the law is clear and well-documented,” Ms. Fairouz involuntarily laughed, and was immediately escorted from the room and arrested by Capitol Police.

The video, along with people sitting close to her, documented her claim that her laugh was involuntary, and that she had not spoken until the guards were grabbing her arms and handcuffing her as they pulled her out of the room. Eventually, the chief judge of the DC Superior Court (Robert E. Morin) dismissed the case and agreed that she should not have been arrested for laughing. However, she was still scolded for interrupting the hearing with her loud protests about being arrested.

An earlier incident had made many people smile, and some to laugh aloud, but was not taken as seriously as was the case of Ms. Fairouz. TV star Bill Maher, in reaction to Donald Trump’s continuing claim that President Barack Obama was born in Kenya and not the United States, gathered a collection of photos of several orangutans, whose hair and facial expressions had some similarities to various photos of Donald Trump. Maher displayed these photos along with a playful claim that Donald Trump’s mother had mated with an orangutan. Of course, Donald Trump didn’t think this was “funny,” and threatened to sue Maher for \$5million.

### Legal Humor: A Historical Perspective

One of the most famous stories about Abraham Lincoln comes from his days as a country lawyer. On the final day of a case that had gone on for several days, he stood up for the all-important closing arguments. All he said was “Let me remind you of the boy who had his facts all correct, but his conclusion all wrong.” Then Attorney Lincoln sat down and the jury left the courtroom.

The jury members returned shortly to render their judgment, in which they declared that the accused person was innocent. Afterwards, when surprised spectators began talking among themselves and wondering how the jury could have made such a quick decision, one of the jury members told the people sitting close to him that if only they had been at dinner in the tavern the previous evening, they would understand. Mr. Lincoln had told a story about a farm boy who had come running into his house to tell his father what he had just seen in the barn.

Johnny (the hired hand) and Susie (the boy’s sister) are up in the hayloft! Johnny has taken off his pants and Susie has her skirt up and they’re fixin’ to pee all over the hay.

The boy’s father calmly told his son that he had his facts right, but his conclusion was all wrong.

### Humor and Governance

A recent legal event resulted in a verdict almost as surprising as the one mentioned in the above story. It began years ago and was resolved by the US Supreme Court in June of 2017. The case was brought to the Supreme Court by Simon Tam, an attorney for an Asian-American rock band named The Slants. The group purposely chose the name, which all parties agreed is “offensive.” This was the explanation that the attorney gave when he filed the case in January:

We grew up and the notion of having slanted eyes was always considered a negative thing. Kids would pull their eyes back in a slant-eyed gesture to make fun of us. ... I wanted to change it to something that was powerful, something that was considered beautiful or a point of pride instead.

National Public Radio put out its story of the event on June 19, 2017, and explained that the case was sent to the Supreme Court because in January the group had been turned down by the US Patent and Trademark Office, which refused to register the band’s chosen name as a trademark. It cited the “Lanham Act,” which prohibits trademarks that could “disparage ... or bring ... into contempt or disrepute persons, living or dead.”

Lee Rowland, an attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union, reacted to the Supreme Court’s decision by saying:

The government’s misguided effort to protect minorities from disparagement instead hurt members of that very community by hindering their right to compete in the

marketplace of ideas. Fortunately, today's opinion prevents the kind of absurd outcome that results when the government plays speech police.

National Public Radio commentator, Nina Totenberg, was also quoted for having reported that “the trademark office has denied registration to a group calling itself *Abort the Republicans*, and another called *Democrats Shouldn't Breed*. It also canceled the “ownership” of the *Washington Redskins* name in 2014 at “the behest of some Native Americans who considered the name offensive.” This does not prevent the famous team from continuing to use the name, but it means that they no longer have exclusive rights to it.

It is this last comment about the idea that the “trademark office” cancelled its trademark protection to the *Washington Redskins* that is most relevant to the ideas included in this textbook. Here is what Justice Samuel Alito wrote about *The Slants*’ case, which was passed with a unanimous vote:

There is also a deeper problem with the argument that commercial speech may be cleansed of any expression likely to cause offense. The commercial market is well stocked with merchandise that disparages prominent figures and groups, and the lines between commercial and non-commercial speech is not always clear, as this case illustrates. If affixing the commercial label permits the suppression of any speech that may lead to political or social “volatility,” free speech would be endangered.

There are many ways in which today's humor and today's laws are related. For at least the past hundred years, the indigenous peoples of America have been – through no choice of their own – brought onto American sports fields as mascots for both school and professional teams. See the chapter on “Physical Education and Sports Mascots” for fuller descriptions. Within the last twenty years, two-thirds of the schools who had Indian-related mascots changed their mascots while many others are currently working on the idea. However, at the professional and collegiate levels, changes have not come about so easily.

### **The Light Side of Legal Humor**

If you want to get a look at an unusually light side of humor related to the law, you might look online for *Excerpts from Court Reporters – Funny Biz*. <http://funnybizblog.com/funny-stuff/excerpts-from-court-reporters>. What's humorous about these printed excerpts is how hard the person doing the transcribing has to work to record both the questions that are asked by judges or lawyers and the answers that are given by the person who is on the witness stand. It is also obvious that the actors in these little dramas have trained themselves to think of all the possibilities that might enable someone to ask for a mistrial. It is nevertheless amusing to see how the customs of the court have taken over common sense. First, here are a few of the questions that were recorded:

Q: Are you qualified to give a urine sample?

Q: The youngest son, the 20-year-old, how old is he?

Q: Were you present when your picture was taken?



Now, here are a few dialogues containing the comments of both the questioner and the person giving the answer. In the last example, we hope that the doctor who gave the “snarky” answer to the judge had a smile on his face. Why would this be important?

Q: Can you describe the individual?

A: He was about medium height and had a beard.

Q: Was this a male, or a female?

Q: Is your appearance here this morning pursuant to a deposition notice which I sent to your attorney?

A: No, this is how I dress when I go to work.

Q: Doctor, before you performed the autopsy, did you check for a pulse?

A: No.

Q: Did you check for blood pressure?

A: No.

Q: Did you check for breathing?

A: No.

Q: So, then it is possible that the patient was alive when you began the autopsy.

A: No.

Q: How can you be so sure, Doctor?

A: Because his brain was sitting on my desk in a jar.

Q: But could the patient have still been alive, nevertheless?

A: Yes, it is possible that he could have been alive and practicing law somewhere.

### **Jokes about Lawyers**

When we first went online to see what we could find about “Humor and the Law,” we were surprised to find two full screens of listings for “Jokes about Lawyers.” Some were identified as to their source while others were given subject-matter headers including “Lawyers in Hell,” “Funny Lawyer Quotes,” “Lawyers Getting Married,” and “Lawyers: the Good, the Bad, and the Terrible.” Here are three more sample negative riddles or jokes.

Q: What do you have when you’ve got a lawyer buried up to his neck in sand?

A: Not enough sand.

Q: Why don’t sharks attack lawyers?

A: Professional courtesy.

Q: What’s the problem with lawyer jokes?

A: Lawyers don’t think they’re funny, and no one else thinks they’re jokes.

Of course, one of the reasons that people resent lawyers is that they usually seek out a lawyer only when they are in some kind of trouble, or when they are frightened by the future and so are hoping to forestall disagreements by drawing up such documents as contracts, wills, and prenuptial agreements.

The very thought of dealing with legal issues puts many people in a bad mood, and then on top of this, they resent having to pay more money than they expected. Lawyers are at a disadvantage here because they are paid at an hourly rate, and their customers are not there to see the hours they spend in preparation. Of course people don't mind paying for the time that a lawyer is actually representing them in court, but they aren't quite so happy to pay for travel time, or for waiting at the courthouse, or for doing the research necessary to find precedents for a case "just like" the one being considered.

A different kind of legal problem relates to the "giving of credit," which usually means obtaining permission and then paying money for the privilege of using someone's writing or art for a different purpose. The law requires that the person who wants to use someone's name or picture for commercial purposes must get permission not only during the artist's or the author's lifetime, but also for seventy years after the person's death. In this case, the permission can be granted by the celebrities' descendants. This law only applies to people who lived in one of the seventeen states that have ratified the law. When 69-year-old Roger Richman died on October 9, 2013, the *New York Times* published his obituary on its "Business Day" page where he was described as the "celebrity agent who is widely credited with helping to invent the dead-celebrity industry." This is a multimillion-dollar realm built on the commercial licensing of the rights to the names and/or the images of prominent individuals for up to seventy years after the person's death.

We wrote about Roger Richman in our *Humor Newsletter* in 1998. At that time, he was already "Guardian of the Image" for forty-five dead celebrities including Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud, W. C. Fields, Jimmy Durante, Mae West, and the Wright brothers. Among the "stolen" images he had successfully fought against was one of Albert Einstein, with his head half-shaved, posing as a loopy-looking pitchman for a hair-loss ad, John Wayne lending his name to a brand of toilet paper, Judy Garland and Clark Gable in pornographic and sadomasochistic poses, and a nearly nude W. C. Fields.

In 2004, Richman told the *Los Angeles Magazine* that before he got into his unique business, he had licensed some celebrity posters, including one of Abba and one of Brooke Shields. Then in May of 1979, W. C. Fields' relatives called him up and wanted him to be their agent. He was surprised and said, "What agent? He's been dead 32 years!" However, the more he learned about the situation, the more politically active he became. With help from several celebrities, he managed in 1984 to get the "California Celebrity Rights Act" passed for the state of California. The requirements outlined in the law are in effect for fifty

years after someone's death. Similar laws have now been passed in at least sixteen other states. Early on, the bill was amended to say that it applied only to people who had sold their image or their name during their lifetimes. Such evidence is needed to prove that the image is indeed "valuable."

This requirement became the hardest part of the job for Richman. He had agents in nineteen countries frequenting flea markets, clipping newspapers, and monitoring television and radio in search of both new and old references to the celebrities that he had been contracted to represent. When Richman retired in 2005, he sold his agency to an image licensing company.

The most impressive of his commissions (he was paid 35 percent of whatever money he collected, with 65 percent going to the heirs) came from the US Post Office. Richman heard that the Post Office was planning to honor W. C. Fields with a stamp, and so he called the top lawyer for the Post Office, William J. Jones. He explained the new law and sent a copy of it to Mr. Jones and thereby became the first person in history to "license the Postal Service."

"Charlie Chaplin Beats the Israeli Lottery" was the headline on an international business story in the *New York Times* (February 18, 2000). It was about the comedian's family winning a lawsuit on copyright infringement. The story marked the end of a bitter 10-year fight conducted in Israeli courts beginning in 1991 when the Israeli Lottery launched an advertising campaign featuring an actor portraying the Little Tramp. Television ads recreated snippets from *The Gold Rush* and silent movies, while billboards and buses showed pictures of the Little Tramp working as a Lottery ticket salesman. When the Chaplin family, which has carefully protected the image on a worldwide scale, petitioned the Lottery to quit using the images, the Lottery refused. Its attorneys challenged the family's right to ownership by saying that "the Little Tramp" was a "generic early-century urban figure, neither created by Chaplin nor uniquely associated with him." They also argued that Chaplin, himself, had plagiarized the character from lesser-known actors. In finding for the Chaplin family, the Israeli Supreme Court said that the Lottery must pay \$25,000 in court costs. A \$1 million suit was still pending. The Lottery attorney, Adi Levit, said, "It's about time to think about a settlement ... I no longer feel like the young man I was when I first took this case." Josephine Chaplin, the comedian's daughter, said that both for commercial and "moral" reasons, the family would not permit a licensing agreement with a lottery or gambling enterprise.

### **Parody Case: *Hustler* vs. Jerry Falwell**

The most famous comic-related law case in living memory is the case of *Hustler Magazine, Inc. vs. Falwell*, 485 U. S. 46 (1988). There were several aspects of the case that made for a grim kind of humor. It started with two of the most unlikely celebrities in the United States facing each other in court.

One was Jerry Falwell, a prominent Christian Fundamentalist televangelist and conservative political commentator. The other was Larry Flint, the editor of the sexually explicit *Hustler* magazine. Flint was born in 1942, and joined the Army at age 15. When he came out, he began working in bars and gradually used sex-related techniques to build an empire that today not only publishes *Hustler* magazine but also produces pornographic films and manages a large company and its buildings. Since 1978, Flint has been paralyzed, rides in a gold-covered wheelchair, and is frequently in pain. He and his attorney were shot in a 1978 murder attempt by an extremely conservative religious man, who had hidden across the street from an office where he knew Flynt would be exiting.

What started the long quarrel, which by the time of Falwell's death in 2007 had evolved into a strange kind of friendship, was a full-page "fake" advertisement that was printed in the November 1983 issue of *Hustler*. Flynt had asked one of his best comedy writers to draw up this advertisement. The magazine had done something similar before, but not on this large scale. The headline was "Jerry Falwell talks about his first time." The page was divided into three columns with an unauthorized, but friendly, picture of Falwell's face leaning his chin on his left fist. The lower right-hand third of the page was devoted to a tall picture of a bottle of *Campari* liquor next to a tall glass and a shorter tumbler, both filled with ice and fruit slices. Across the bottom of the page was the slogan "CAMPARI: You'll never forget your first time."

The joke behind this advertisement page was that the person being interviewed is answering questions he thinks are related to his "imagined" first time of drinking Campari, but when the interviewer wrote up the answers, he changed the situation to be about the interviewee's first time of having sex. The transcript of this spoof interview includes a description of Falwell casually sharing details about his first sexual encounter, which was made to appear as an incestuous rendezvous with his mother in the family outhouse. We were both "drunk off our God-fearing asses on Campari," says Falwell, and near the end of the fake interview he volunteered, "I always get sloshed before I go out to the pulpit. You don't think I could lay down all that bullshit *sober*, do you?"

The ad carried a disclaimer in small print at the bottom of the page that said, "ad parody – not to be taken seriously." The page was also listed on the *Hustler's* Table of Contents as "Fiction: Ad and Personality Parody."

However, these two notices were not what saved *Hustler* from losing the case at the Supreme Court. Instead, the unanimous decision of the Court was based on the wording of a law that says "Parodies of public figures which could not reasonably be taken as true are protected against civil liability by the First Amendment, even if intended to cause emotional distress." The Supreme Court did request that *Hustler* pay Reverend Fallwell 150,000 dollars (one source said it was \$200,000) for emotional distress, but their conclusion was that "no

reasonable reader could understand the publication as an assertion of fact,” and therefore “it is incapable of harming reputation.”

Later, Nathan Poe, a man well known on the Internet for his writings about Christianity, was involved in a debate about Creationism. One of the people in the debate thanked another contributor to the debate by saying “Good thing you included the *winky*. Otherwise people might think you are serious.” From this, Poe came up with the adage “Without a winking, smiley or other blatant display of humor, it is utterly impossible to parody a Creationist in such a way that *someone* won’t mistake it for the genuine article.” While he made the statement specifically about *Creationism*, it has been generalized to apply to any kind of fundamentalism or extremism. In some ways, it was a continuation of what in 1983 a man named Jerry Schwarz had posted on Usenet, when he wrote:

Avoid sarcasm and facetious remarks. Without the voice inflection and body language of personal communication these are easily misinterpreted. A sideways smile, :-) (made in the old fashioned way of a colon, a dash and a parentheses, which our new computer now automatically changes to the more familiar Smiley) has become widely accepted on the net as an indication that “I’m only kidding.” If you submit a satiric item without this symbol, no matter how obvious the satire is to you, do not be surprised if people take it seriously.

On April 24, 2013, the *Media Law Journal* stated, “It’s not that the law clearly protects humorous speech and satire. That question is a bit vexed.” What was intended as satire might possibly turn out to be legally a case of defamation. It was here determined that in its most general sense, a fair use is any copying of copyrighted material done for a limited and “transformative” purpose, such as to comment upon, criticize, or parody a copyrighted work. Such uses can be done without permission from the copyright owner. On January 13, 2014, the Kelly/Warner Law determined that “With cases involving outrageous parody and satire, the path of least resistance has been to find the ‘speech’ non-defamatory as a matter of law.” Kelly and Warner say that defamation is a believable false statement of fact that causes material harm. Satire is “the use of humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people’s stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues.”

Here are some of the ways that humor has been used to point out the many ironies and paradoxes in the law:

- Voltaire said, “It is forbidden to kill; therefore, all murderers are punished unless they kill in large numbers and to the sound of trumpets.”
- Honoré de Balzac said, “Laws are spider webs through which the big flies pass and the little ones get caught.”
- Jimmy Carter said, “Penalties against possession of a drug should not be more damaging to an individual than the use of the drug itself.”

## Judge Judy

Probably the best-loved judge in the United States is Judge Judy, who says all kinds of outrageous and funny things. Since 1996, her televised show has been extremely popular (the last time we looked, 83 percent of Google users had said they liked it). Students in our Senior Citizen classes often allude to Judge Judy or imitate her intonation when they want to say something sort of “questionable.” We can’t remember our college students ever talking about the show, but maybe that’s because here in Arizona it comes on in the late afternoons when regular college students are likely to be involved in classes or work, but is the time that many senior citizens are relaxing and watching TV before supper. The star is Judith Sheindlin, a former family-court judge, who now works as a small-claims judge in what looks like a typical courtroom, but is really a television studio.

It is “show business” from beginning to end. Notice how catchy and easy it is to remember the two similar words: JUDGE and JUDY, which on a subconscious level might also make people think of “Punch and Judy,” that grand couple from the seventh century who were in serious need of either legal services or marriage counselors.

The people who come to lay their claims out in front of Judge Judy are private citizens who have applied to be on her television show and have agreed to obey her decisions, which are mostly between individuals wanting to be compensated for something that the opponent has done. We don’t remember seeing her trying to settle disagreements between husbands and wives, but she often tackles the problems of people who used to be close relatives. We assume that their expenses are paid by the television company, who also pays Judge Judy’s salary. We also assume that the courtroom audience is made up of people who apply to receive tickets, just as they do with most talk-shows. Audience members understand that they are not to take sides or to indicate their feelings about either the complainants or about Judge Judy. The complainants are responsible for bringing in their own documentation and any police records that have already been made.

The first clue that Judge Judy is a performer rather than a representative of either a city, a state, a county, or a regional jurisdiction, is that she goes by only her first name, and she is quick to react with statements that are halfway “legal” and halfway like something an outspoken aunt might say to her immature niece or nephew. Here are some examples:

- “If you tell the truth, you don’t have to have a good memory. If you lie, you’re always tripping over your own tie.”
- “I’m not 25, and I’m not 5’8”, but I know when someone is pulling my leg.”
- “Let me tell you something. This is my playpen, and I get the last word.”
- “I got you ten ways from Sunday, madam!”
- “DON’T SPEAK! See how fast I can get the smile off your face?”

- “If I could fine you for stupid, I would fine you for stupid.”
- “Let me tell you something: If you live to be a hundred, you’ll never be as smart as I am in one finger.”

Many of her answers – like the ones above – are flip but other times they are just plain funny, as when she asked an injured defendant who wasn’t able to make the deliveries that were crucial to his job, “Well, what did you think you were going to do for UPS, deliver babies?” To another person in her court, she said, “I don’t care about your stress! You should care about my stress; I’m older than you are!” and to another she said, “I don’t care whether you had a 30-day notice, a 3-day notice, or a partridge in a pear tree!”

Other attorneys have tried to mount televised shows following Judge Judy’s pattern, but they aren’t nearly as popular. Judge Judy is a master at controlling not only the people who are “on trial,” but also their witnesses and sometimes people they have brought with them for moral support. We can’t remember her ever having to correct someone from the audience. We suspect that one reason for her “strict” demeanor with the complainants and the defendants, is to frighten the audience into good behavior.

Because of the power imbalance in any courtroom, both the plaintiff and the defendant are in uncomfortable situations. Furthermore, the plaintiff’s lawyer and the defendant’s lawyer are saying really bad things about their clients’ opponents, trying to discredit not only their stories, but them as well. The main difference between Judge Judy’s court and regular courtrooms is that the parties have to act as their own attorneys. They know that a judgment is going to be made against one of them, or maybe even both of them to a certain extent, and so the situation is stressful for both the plaintiff and the defendant. Being on *Judge Judy* is probably the most exciting thing they will ever do, and so of course they are nervous about making a “good” showing for themselves.

Social hierarchy is an important feature of “Comedies of Manners.” Here, the people with money, prestige, and power are in control of the people with little money, prestige, or power. In Beaumarchais’ *The Marriage of Figaro*, there is an unjust law which states that before a servant can get married, the Lord of the Manor is allowed to take the virginity of the servant’s bride-to-be. The plot of *The Marriage of Figaro* is about the ways in which the servants are able to avoid complying with this unjust law. In Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, the unjust “law” is that Shylock was approved to take a pound of flesh if a debt was not paid by a certain time. But Portia, the smart woman lawyer, outwits Shylock by telling him that he was not approved to take a drop of blood with the flesh. Therefore, he couldn’t take the flesh because it would also involve the shedding of blood.

The Athenian legislator Draco, whose name is the same as that of the dragon constellation, got his name in the dictionary as *draconian* to describe



conditions, laws, or actions that are “harsh and unreasonable.” In 621 BC, he was assigned the task of collecting and cataloguing Athens’ unwritten laws. The laws were extremely harsh, with most crimes being punishable by death. Before Draco gathered the laws and wrote them down, they had probably been enforced only spasmodically, but once they were codified authorities began enforcing them and people blamed Draco rather than the enforcers or the legislators who originally established the laws.

### **Who Owns a Tweet?**

The question “Who Owns a Tweet?” was the headline on a *New York Times* photo and story (August 6, 2017) about Frank Ocean, a young singer performing at the Panorama Music Festival on July 28. The story opened with, “Frank Ocean gave a rare, intimate performance at Panorama Music Festival late last month that enraptured his fans – and had some unexpected consequences that went far beyond music.” The writer of the article, Valeriya Safronovan, went on to tell about the message on the plain, white T-shirt that Frank Ocean wore while he was singing at the Festival. Printed on the front of his shirt in black capital letters was the message:

**WHY BE RACIST,  
SEXIST, HOMOPHOBIC  
OR TRANSPHOBIC WHEN YOU COULD  
JUST BE QUIET?**

Thanks to Twitter, news went out that the shirt was produced by Green Box Shop, an online company founded the previous year by 18-year-old Kayla Robinson. The shirt was made of organic cotton and sold for \$18.99. The Green Box Shop usually gets 100 orders a day for its various products, but after the concert and the photo of Frank Ocean wearing the shirt went online, the Green Box Shop received 5,500 orders for the shirt.

However, it turned out that this wasn’t the first time the message had gone viral online. In August of 2015, Brandon Male, an 18-year-old student from North Syracuse, created the tweet and put it online. Then in January of 2017, a user who goes by the handle @lustdad posted an image of himself wearing the T-shirt, which garnered more than 87,000 retweets and over 191,000 likes.

The first time that Mr. Male saw the shirt with his original tweet on it, he contacted the Green Box Shop and was met with what he described as “mostly dismissal.” He said “They told me I needed to calm down and that they had once credited me on Instagram one time.” They also sent \$100. To this accusation, Ms. Robinson, the founder of the Green Box Shop, replied that she did not handle her company’s social media until recently and so she did not know about Mr. Male’s request.

She had learned about the quote from “someone” who directly messaged her company with the quote and the statement that “you should put this on a shirt.” She later sent Mr. Male a check for \$100. Mr. Male said, “They threw me \$100 and told me to go away.” He figured that the hundred dollars was “less than 1 percent” of the revenue that Green Box Shop had pulled in over the first two days that the shirt was sold.

As the shirt became more and more popular, Mr. Male started speaking up again and tweeting about the matter. He said that a lot of his followers – along with strangers – came to his defense. In the *NYT* article, it was unclear whether Mr. Male or the *New York Times* contacted Christine E. Weller, an associate at Griesing Law, a firm that specializes in intellectual property and technology. In reference to the disagreement, Ms. Weller explained that

People will often take images they find online and reproduce them because they think they have the right to. But that’s not the case. It’s generally not permitted without the permission of the copyholder.... Copyright is an opt-out system ... which means your intellectual property is yours unless you specifically allow others to use it (through the Creative Common license, for example).

Then the article went on to explain that exceptions to this rule are given to people who appropriate content for purposes like commentary, criticism, or scholarship. But whether or not someone qualifies for this kind of exception is not always clear. Decisions made in court have gone both ways. Ms. Robinson, the founder of Green Box Shop, was quoted as saying that she has called Mr. Male to apologize and to set up a time to discuss “the numbers.”

She also said that her original decision to just start making the shirts “was impulsive,” and she had not looked at the number of sales when Mr. Male first wrote to her. She added that since she too is a creative person, “It would be pretty irresponsible of me to just take it.” Attorney Weller added that “There’s an open question about whether a short, pithy tweet falls under copyright protection.” However, she strongly advises anyone who is considering “borrowing” a tweet for commercial purposes that “When in doubt they should “reach out” because cases of this type, which have gone to court, have been decided on both sides of the issue.

### Funny State Laws

In the United States, the Federal laws tend to be quite sensible because these laws are usually more general in nature and have been through fairly heavy vetting. But by looking at the laws in various states, we can see that the United States might not be as united as we had thought. And we would suggest that some of these laws could be considered “draconian” – harsh or unreasonable. Fairly recently the editors of the *Reader’s Digest* investigated the state laws and published what they felt to be “50 of the dumbest state laws.” In

their online introduction, they cautioned that “Your home state could have the nation’s stupidest law. By the way: You’re probably breaking some of these [laws] right now.”

**Arkansas:** People in Arkansas were so tired of strangers thinking that they were some adjunct of the state of Kansas, that they made a state law declaring it illegal to mispronounce the state’s name. The only acceptable pronunciation is “in three (3) syllables, with the final ‘s’ silent, the ‘a’ in each syllable with the Italian sound, and the accent on the first and last syllables.”

**Connecticut:** In Connecticut, pickles are required by law to bounce, which necessitates that they be crisp and firm. This law became “necessary” in 1948 after two scheming pickle packers tried to sell pickles “unfit for human consumption.” Connecticut’s Food and Drug Commissioner specified that if a pickle is dropped from the height of one foot, it must bounce in order to be declared “legal.”

**Florida:** In Florida it is illegal for people to sell their children. This law was probably inspired by the fact that “sellers” could meet “buyers,” who would immediately float away on a ship, soon sailing beyond the reach of American law.

**Georgia:** In Gainesville, Georgia (the poultry capital of the world) it is illegal to eat fried chicken with a knife and fork. You must eat fried chicken with your fingers.

**Idaho:** Idaho is the only state in the union to have a legal ban on cannibalism. Evidently, in all other states, it is not a crime.

**Iowa:** In Iowa it’s a Misdemeanor to pass off margarine, oleo, or oleomargarine as real butter. Doing this is punishable by up to 30 days in jail and a \$625 fine. Even in Arizona when we were children, and margarine was a new invention, we remember that it had to be sold in its white form – like shortening. A small dark yellow capsule was included that could be mixed in to the product, thereby changing its color from white to yellow. Probably Iowa lawmakers were trying to protect the dairy farmers in their state.

**Kentucky:** In Kentucky, all public officials and attorneys have to swear an oath that they “have not fought a duel with deadly weapons nor acted as a second in another person’s duel.” This law took effect in 1848, at which time many would-be duelists turned to street brawling.

**Maine:** In Maine it is illegal to advertise on tombstones.

**Maryland:** In order to combat road rage, there is a law on the Rockville, Maryland books to outlaw swearing or cursing on any street or highway. Anyone caught swearing must add \$100 to the “city swear jar.”

**Michigan:** In 1941 a law was enacted to provide for the payment of bounties for the killing of starlings and crows. Citizens were awarded three cents for a starling, or ten cents for a crow that was brought to the court house in “a good state of preservation.” This law was repealed in 2006.

**Minnesota:** It is no longer legal to grease pigs in Minnesota. Apparently during those long, frozen winters, people would grease pigs and then hold

competitions to see who could catch them first when they were let out of their pens to run in the snow.

**Mississippi:** In Mississippi it is deemed an inalienable right to consume “Big Gulps” of all sizes. This law was enacted in reaction to Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s New York decision to limit the size of “Big Gulps,” which is a brand name for oversize paper cups. However, it might be worth noting that one in three people in Mississippi is “overweight.”

**New Jersey:** In all states, it is illegal to murder someone, but in New Jersey it’s doubly against the law to murder someone while wearing a bulletproof vest.

**New Mexico:** In New Mexico “Indecent Exposure” has been redefined to exclude the phrase “walking around with your butt out.” The law now reads “intentionally exposing primary genital area to public view,” which must mean that butts are now OK.

**Ohio:** In Ohio, coal mine operators are legally required to provide “an adequate supply of toilet paper” with each toilet.

**Washington:** In Washington, there is a “Bigfoot Sanctuary” of roughly one million acres of land, in which it is illegal to poach a sasquatch. The reasoning is that if Bigfoot exists, it would have to be considered to be on the endangered species list, and therefore in need of protection. This felony went on to the Washington books in 1969, and is punishable by a \$1,000 fine.

### Points of Departure

1. What do you think about the logic in the court case about the rock band named *The Slants*? Do you think the national publicity around the Supreme Court case is a help in making this group well known? If you heard the band was coming to your city, would you make an effort to attend a performance?
2. Find a joke about a lawyer. Bring it to class for an informal joke-telling day. Analyze the jokes that are brought in. Who is being made fun of? Why? Which jokes are the most realistic and which ones are the most original?
3. What do you think about the way that *Hustler* magazine wrote the fake article (which they disguised as an advertisement) about Reverend Jerry Falwell? This happened several years ago. What would be an equivalent action today?
4. See if you can find your city or state laws online. If you succeed, find one that you think is humorous or just “plain dumb”. How would you go about getting it deleted?
5. Bring in a cartoon clipped from a newspaper or a magazine. Put them all on a bulletin board and see if your class can agree on which ones are the funniest and which one does the best job of making a point.

Linguists tend to study such small *discourses* as words, phrases, and sentences, and then for a bigger challenge they also study jokes. One reason that linguists like to study jokes is that most jokes are small and manageable discourses, while at the same time they are sophisticated in the way they share a message. Plus, most jokes are shared orally, so they give linguists an opportunity to work with aspects of both spoken and written language, which is one of the goals of script – model grammar. Of course we all know that plays and movies (i.e. screenplays) have scripts, but what linguists have discovered is that jokes also have scripts. And even though these scripts are not written down, they exist in the minds of the tellers, and sometimes in the minds of listeners.

In several ways, jokes rely on many of the same dramatic devices as do scripts written by some of the world's greatest playwrights. One of the most important dramatic devices of the joke is intentional ambiguity, or “double-entendre.” Jokes tend to be filled with *double-entendre*, so that at a minimum they consist of two parts. First is the set-up, and then comes the story, which includes the “punch-line.” In the set-up part of the joke, the text is loaded in the direction of the mundane, but in the punch-line part of the joke, the text is loaded in the direction of a more dramatic meaning, which is the surprise. This surprise is often a naughty or sexual reading. This reverse loading of the punch-line is what makes the joke work because it triggers an epiphany for the audience. The listeners have been hearing a normal story about normal things, but then the punch-line moves the listener's understanding toward a dramatic reading that causes the listener to reconsider the entire set-up of the joke and to realize that this dramatic reading is pointing the listener to what might be called *biting satire*. Notice how “biting satire” is used alongside such terms as a *sharp-tongued* wit, a *pointed* remark, or a *barbed* joke. Other evidence of this kind of expectation is revealed when people talk about comedians *cracking up* or *killing* an audience, as they tell *side-splitting* jokes and try to *break* someone up, to *knock 'em dead*, or to *slay 'em*. And, of course, people are proud if they have told a *killer* or a *side-splitting* joke, while they are embarrassed if they have *bombed*. It is interesting to see how many words related to humor also have “dangerous” meanings.

*Punch* was the name of the most famous humor magazine in the world. It was established in London in 1841. The first editor was Henry Mayhew, who worked with an engraver named Ebenezer Landells. The magazine helped establish the term *cartoon*, and over the years it continued to grow, with its circulation peaking in the 1940s. It then began to face new kinds of competition, and gradually circulation diminished and it went out of business in 2002.

In the United States we have enjoyed the *National Lampoon*, and the *Harvard Lampoon*, while in Russia people enjoyed a satirical magazine named *Krokodil*. In other countries too, satirical magazines are named after such things as lemons or porcupines, i.e. names which hint at the idea of playful or mild aggression.

Robert Priest, a psychologist at West Point Military Academy, has proposed what he calls the MICH Theory of humor. MICH stands for “Moderate Intergroup Conflict Humor.” Priest says that people will not use humor with each other unless there is some kind of tension or strong feeling, but he also says that if the tensions or feelings are too strong, then they will not be relieved by mild forms of humor.

### **Horation vs. Juvenalian Satire**

One example of the MICH theory of humor is seen in the distinction between what is called Horatian satire as compared to Juvenalian satire. Horatian satire is named after Horace (Quintus Horatius Flaccus) who lived in Rome from 65 to 8 BCE (Before the Christian Era). He wrote humorous satires that would gently ridicule or mock the dominant opinions and philosophical beliefs of ancient Rome and Greece. His humor was made up of witty exaggerations and clever mockery, which he used to tease his readers. When the Museum of Television and Radio in New York City put on a six-month exhibit, *Stand-Up Comedians on Television*, one major section was devoted to “Social Satire.” It was divided into three sections: the Instigator, the Politico, and the Sage. Exhibit notes explained that social satirists follow in the tradition of Mark Twain and Will Rogers. Their sole mission is to make you think before you laugh. They were talking about Horatian satire, which has the purpose of amusing people enough that they will take a new look at their society and work to move it closer to being a utopia. Modern examples include Lois Lowry’s prize-winning children’s book, *The Giver* (1993) and George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1954). Both of these books have anti-totalitarian messages, along with gentle humor, as when in Jonathan Swift’s 1726 *Gulliver’s Travels*, the hero Gulliver travels to such places as Lilliput, Brobdingnag, Laputa, and the Country of the Houyhnhnms. It is humorous, when he is in Lilliput, to find an adult man of apparently average size, suddenly living amongst people who are extremely small. On one fateful morning, he wakes up to find himself pinned down by

hundreds of threads placed over his body by the tiny people of Lilliput, who were frightened by the vision of such a “giant” bringing them harm. An equally funny incident is when he puts out the fire that is burning the Queen’s palace by urinating on it.

*Juvenalian Satire* (not to be confused with the word *juvenile*) is named after the Roman poet *Juvenal*, who lived in the first century after Christ. Many of today’s most popular comedians go back and forth between creating Horatian humor and the stronger Juvenalian satire. For example, in talking about the possibility of being angry about something unfair or ridiculous, Henry Rule confessed, “In truth I don’t ever seem to be in a good enough humor with anything [that has gone wrong] to satirize it. No, I want to stand up before it and curse it, and foam at the mouth – or take a club and pound it to rags and pulp.”

Probably the best-known example of Juvenalian humor is Jonathan Swift’s 1729 “A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People in Ireland, from Being a Burden to their Parents or to their Country.” In order to solve the problem, he suggested that at the age of one year, poor Irish children should be sold as food to be eaten by landlords and other members of the upper class. One of the lines that most of the readers who have read his “Modest Proposal” never forget was his statement that Irish mothers should be encouraged to let their children “suck plentifully in the last Month, so as to render them plump and fat for a good table.”

### Funny Scripts

Victor Raskin and Salvatore Attardo have said that a text is funny if and only if the text is compatible (fully or in part) with two distinct scripts, and the two distinct scripts are in some way opposite. In order to demonstrate this script opposition, Raskin tells the following joke: “Is the doctor at home?” the patient asks in his bronchial whisper. “No,” the doctor’s young and pretty wife whispers in reply. “Come right in.”

The actors in this mini-drama are a “patient” and a “doctor,” and both of these words support the “health” interpretation. “The doctor’s wife” and “bronchial whisper” also support the “health” script, but why is it mentioned that she is “young” and “pretty,” and why is she “whispering”? Then, when the doctor’s wife says, “No. Come right in,” the “health” script is violated, because if the doctor is not in, the patient would ordinarily not be invited in, so we have to look for a new interpretation – an interpretation that supports “young,” “pretty” and “whispering.”

Then comes the “Ah ha!” “I get it!” We were given false clues with “patient,” “doctor” and “doctor’s wife.” What’s really happening here is a tryst – so the new words, representing the opposing script, take precedence. The set-up script



is always relatively mundane, while the opposing punch-line script is dramatic and often sexual, scatological, or obscene.

One of the things that linguists like about jokes is that they are usually succinct. Jokes are like poetry in this respect. One of the great ways of packing a lot of semantic meaning into a word or expression is to use various rhetorical devices. For example, *allusion* is the noun form of the English verb “to allude.” “Allude” comes from Latin “ad-” plus “ludere” meaning “to play.” A good example of allusion is the name of the character “Jiminy Cricket” in Walt Disney’s 1940 film, *Pinocchio*. Modern English is filled with allusions, thanks partly to modern media, where “instant” allusions can be puffed out in readers’ or listeners’ minds to full stories. The expression “By Jiminy” used to be a swearword. In fact, it was a double swearword, because it was swearing by the constellation “Gemini” which represented the twins (Castor and Pollux) from Greek mythology. Americans, who were not as familiar with Greek mythology as were European speakers, changed the expression to “Jiminy Christmas.” Walt Disney took it a step further by changing it to “Jiminy Cricket” when his company turned Carlo Collodi’s 1882 book, *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, into a film. In Collodi’s original *Pinocchio* there is a “talking cricket,” who offers advice to the naughty little puppet who has miraculously been changed into a boy. However, fairly early in the book, the boy doesn’t like taking advice and throws a hammer, killing the cricket.

The cricket’s ghost later appears as a minor character, but it was the genius of the Walt Disney makers of the 1940 *Pinocchio* film to name the cricket and give him a major role as the little boy’s conscience. What better conscience could one have than someone with the same initials as Jesus Christ? However, in one of Alleen’s Children’s Literature classes, a student wrote on the final course evaluation, “I don’t think it was nice of the teacher to compare Jesus Christ to a cricket.”

Sometimes allusions can be intentionally confused for comic effect. For example, comedian Michael Davis had a show in which he claimed that he was juggling with the ax that George Washington had used to chop down the cherry tree. “However,” he explained, “I did have to replace the handle,” and then, after some more silent juggling, “and the head.”

On the *George Burns and Gracie Allen* television show, Gracie often got her allusions wrong.

GEORGE: If you keep saying funny things, people are going to laugh at you.

GRACIE: That’s OK. Look at Joan of Arc. People laughed at her, but she went ahead and built it anyway.

*Antithesis* is another rhetorical device that can be used for epiphany, and therefore for comic effect. Antithesis occurs when opposite concepts are connected so as to make a surprising kind of sense, as in a Mastercard advertisement

showing a picture of a tall man looking at a shirt. The caption reads, “You found a 50 long. But you’re \$17 short.” The *World Book Encyclopedia* ran a summertime advertising campaign under the slogan, “Schools are closed ... Minds are open.” The Hoover Company advertised its irons with “The iron with the bottom that makes it tops.” Shortly after Gerald Ford assumed the US Presidency, he amused an audience at Ohio State University by saying, “So much has happened in the few months since you were kind enough to invite me to speak here today. I was then America’s first instant Vice-President, and then I became America’s first instant President. The Marine Corps Band is so confused they don’t know whether to play “Hail to the Chief,” or “You’ve Come a Long Way, Baby.”

*Chiasmus* is when words are repeated, but in inverted order. Consider the following humorous examples.

- Mae West said, “It’s not the men in my life that count; it’s the life in my men.”
- A bumper sticker reads, “Aging is a matter of mind over matter: If you don’t mind, it doesn’t matter.”
- Another bumper sticker reads, “Marijuana is not a question of ‘Hi, how are you’ but of ‘How high are you?’”
- A one-liner that is popular around tax time reads, “The IRS: We’ve got what it takes to take what you’ve got.”

*Eponyms* are created when the name of a real or mythical person is used in reference to something other than that individual. In 1992, the term “Frankenfood” started being used for genetically altered tomatoes or other foods. During the first Gulf War, American soldiers complained about *Johnny Weissmuller* field showers where the cold water made them scream like Tarzan. They named them after the Olympic swimming star, Johnny Weissmuller, who was the most famous of the different actors who played Tarzan in the *Tarzan* movies. When the wealthy Ross Perot was running for president, he was accused of holding the *Daddy Warbucks* theory of presidential qualifications. Daddy Warbucks was the wealthy-but-absent father of the lonely little girl in the *Little Orphan Annie* comic strip. In the seven-year period between 1987 and 1994, the Los Angeles police were involved in 700 shooting incidents. Of these, 500 were potentially life-threatening incidents, and the national news announced that the officers had succumbed to the *John Wayne* syndrome.

Sometimes an eponym is based on just first names, as in the noun *Lazy Susan*, the verb to *peter out*, or exclamations like *Great Scott!* and *By George!* Sometimes the words rhyme, as with *even Steven*, and *ready for Freddie*. And sometimes there is alliteration in addition to eponymy, as in *gloomy Gus*, *dumb Dora*, and *nervous Nellie*. Or there could be assonance, as in *alibi Ike*, *fancy Dan*, *sneaky Pete*, *long johns*, and *screaming Meemie*.

In English, *Joe* is a simple generic name, as in *Joe Six-Pack*, which is a refinement of the *Good Old Joe* concept, seen earlier in *Joe Blow*, *Joe Schmo*,

and the more specific *G. I. Joe* for a soldier. The *G. I.* means “Government Issue,” and was imprinted on soldiers’ uniforms. Other examples of the *Joe* eponym include *Joe (or J.) Random Hacker* for a computer whiz, *Holy Joe* for an army chaplain, *Joe College* for a college student, and even *Joe Camel* for the controversial cartoon character that was used to sell Camel cigarettes.

*Metaphor* is another rhetorical device that can be used for humorous effect, especially when the metaphors are so common that they are called *Dead Metaphors*. Soldiers in the military used to be required to wear *dog tags* that hung on a chain around their necks. As with the dog tags that are attached to dog collars, the military tags helped to identify soldiers who might be unable to speak for themselves if they become casualties of combat. The expression *raining cats and dogs* originated when London had such poor sewer drainage that in city streets small animals could easily drown. After a heavy rainstorm, dead cats and dogs were lying in the gutters. Today it is just a humorous kind of exaggeration.

*Bite the dust* and *kick the bucket* are two more dead metaphors – in more ways than one. *Bite the dust* is a cowboy metaphor that originated with cowboys getting thrown off from a bucking bronco. It later became an expression for “to die.” To *kick the bucket* is a bit more subtle. It refers to a particular way of committing suicide, where a person stands on a bucket, ties one end of a rope around his neck, and the other end of the rope around a firm object overhead. When the person “kicks the bucket,” he or she is choked to death.

*Metonymy* occurs when something is named for a quality that is in some way associated with the item. In the days of CB radios, people often chose “handles” (self-given nicknames) that were descriptive of their physical characteristics or their hobbies. Today with email and the Internet, some people choose nicknames that are metonymous. For example, Jeff Gordon, a professor of geography at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, collects interesting names of antique shops. He has collected more than 300 names, including such creative examples as:

Another Fine Mess  
As You Were  
The Collected Works  
Fourscore and More  
A Touch of Glass  
Den of Antiquity

Sometimes the antique shops are metonymically associated with the names of the owners, as in:

Suzantiques  
Shair’s Wares  
Young’s Oldies  
Fine’s finds

The term *Watergate* is another example of metonymy. The Watergate Hotel is where the break-in of the National Democratic headquarters occurred during Richard Nixon's presidency. Today's dictionaries give more room to the metonymous meaning of Watergate than to the literal meaning of "a gate controlling the flow of water." *Gate* has now become a suffix meaning "scandal" as in *Irangate*, *Contragate*, *Iraqgate*, *Pearlygate* (a scandal involving Televangelists), *Murphygate* (referring to Murphy Brown on television), *Nannygate* (referring to Arnold Schwarzenegger's having a baby with the family's Nanny), and *Monicagate* referring to President Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky.

Diseases are sometimes given metonymous names. For example, the "Pickwickian Syndrome" gets its name from Charles Dickens' *The Pickwick Papers* (1837) in which Joe the Fat Boy constantly falls asleep. The disease is a condition in which blood veins going to the brain are squeezed so that people fall asleep in the midst of everyday activities. "Ondine's Curse" describes a condition in which sleeping people cease breathing and die without awakening. It is named for a mythological water nymph who cursed her mortal lover when he betrayed her. "Legionnaire's Disease" is named for the twenty-nine victims who died after attending a 1976 American Legion convention in a hotel with a contaminated air-conditioning system. The hotel managers probably breathed a sigh of relief when the disease happened to be named after the people who died, rather than after the hotel.

*Synecdoche* is a specific kind of metonymy in which a part of something is used to represent the whole thing. Movies are "the big screen," television is "the tube." Football kicker Lou Grossa was called "The Toe," while the outspoken baseball player and coach Leo Durocher was called "The Lip." Actress Betty Grable was called "The Million-Dollar Legs," while Jimmy Durante was called "The Schnoz." In a Brant Parker *Wizard of Id* cartoon a girl brings home a boy and introduces him with, "Father, he's asked for my hand." The father replies, "Marv ... It's the whole package or nothing."

The literal meaning of *Nonsense* is that it doesn't make sense, but in truth, people do manage to make some kind of sense out of almost any set of words if they are placed in a conventional order, for example, a noun phrase followed by a verb phrase. Noam Chomsky's example of a nonsense sentence was "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously," which has by now been repeated by thousands of linguistics professors and their students. The linguist Martin Joos has given "I never saw a horse smoke a dozen oranges." Even if these are both "nonsense," they have some meaning or else we wouldn't be able to say that Chomsky's nonsense sentence is false, while Joos's nonsense sentence is true.

In truth, nonsense verse and other nonsense is usually carefully constructed so that it has a strong rhythmic quality that serves to highlight logical infelicities and nonce words. "Nonce" means "only once." As in the nonsense words

found in Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" poem where he created "frabjous" and "galumphing."

Nonsense can also be found in the logic of some seemingly ordinary pieces, as in Charles Dickens' story for children, "The Magic Fishbone," in which he makes fun of large Victorian families by describing Princess Alicia's family as follows:

They had nineteen children and were always having more. Seventeen of these children took care of the baby, and Alicia, the eldest, took care of them all. Their ages varied from seven years to seven months.

*Oxymoron* comes from two Greek words: *oxys* meaning "sharp" and *moros*, meaning "foolish or dull." This kind of paradox or contradiction can be seen in such brand names as "Icy-Hot" (an arthritis medicine), "Cool Fire" (a line of shoes), and "Soft Brick" (a floor covering). Oxymorons also appear in such phrases as "All deliberate speed," "Civil War," "peace offensive," "friendly fire," and in the ironic slogan, "Anarchists Unite!"

*Personification* and *Animation* are two additional humorous rhetorical devices. Even babies respond to toys as if they were human. In nursery rhymes and stories, animals, dolls, "choo-choo" trains, and teapots come to life. We never outgrow this kind of personification. The Ents in J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (1955) not only can talk and communicate with other Ents and with humans; they are even able to leave their forests in order to storm a castle. One of the Ents is named Treebeard; Treebeard is the oldest creature in Tolkien's Middle Earth. Many of the animals in Walt Disney movies are also personified. Examples include Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, and Goofy, the dog; however, the term that they use is "Animation" because in addition to animals becoming personified, inanimate objects, like mountains, rocks, and trees can come to life (i.e. become animated).

A favorite rhetorical device for linguists and word lovers is the *pun*. Richard Lederer in the introduction to his *Get Thee to a Punnery* (1988) said that puns are "a three-ring circus of words: words clowning, words teetering on tightropes, words swinging from tent-tops, words thrusting their heads into the mouths of lions." Tony Tanner said that a pun is like an adulterous bed in which two meanings that should be separated are coupled together. Debra Fried defined puns as "the weird accidents, amazing flukes and lucky hits that the one-armed bandit of language dishes up." This definition contains an instance of "once-removed personification," because a "one-armed bandit" is itself a personified reference to a gambling machine.

We will end this section with the rhetorical device of *Zeugma*, intentional faulty parallelism. The idea is that this kind of a sentence structure points more attention toward the item that is either unexpected or is different from the other items in a list. For example, Chuckles the Clown on the *Mary Tyler Moore*

show offered, “A little song..., A little dance..., A little Seltzer down your pants!” Naturalist Joseph Wood Krutch wrote that “the most serious charge that can be brought against New England is not Puritanism, but February.” Henry Clay declared that he “would rather be right than President.” A *Wall Street Journal* cartoon by D. Cresci pictured a bank robber informing the teller, “You won’t get hurt if you hand over all the money, keep quiet, and validate this parking ticket.”

When William F. Buckley Jr. was campaigning to be Mayor of New York City in 1965, he railed against the restrictions being put on New York City police. He complained that they couldn’t use clubs or gas or dogs. And then he concluded with, “I suppose they will have to use poison ivy.”

The term *Malapropism* comes from Mrs. Malaprop, a character in Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s play, *The Rivals* (1775). She was always mis-hearing and mis-analyzing words and phrases. All three of these examples come from “old” language that is out of the ordinary and that is usually spoken rather than read from a printed script.

Sometimes these *slips of the tongue*, or *slips of the ear*, are written intentionally. One of the most successful novelty songs of all time has the following lyrics:

Mairzy doats and dozy doats and liddle lamzy divey.  
A kiddley divey too, wooden shoe?

Then, the next verse provides clues to the meaning:

Now if the words sound queer, and funny to your ear,  
A little bit jumbled and jivey,  
Sing, “Mares eat oats and does eat oats, and little lambs eat ivy.  
A kid will eat ivy too, wouldn’t you?”

Both of us remember singing this song when we were kids, and it was a welcome relief from all the patriotic songs and serious news about World War II. Creators Milton Drake, Al Hoffman, and Jerry Livingston recorded it in 1943. The recording reached number one in record sales, not to mention how often it was played on the radio. One of the differences between then and now is that it was also sold as sheet music with over 450,000 buyers. Having the sheet music in front of them gave people an extra chance to appreciate the many puns.

While this “silly song” was purely for fun, in the 1970s Norman Lear produced a famous (some people thought it infamous) television show that was more serious in the way that it re-analyzed modern family life. It was entitled *All in the Family* and featured an American family of four. The father, Archie Bunker, was played by Carroll O’Connor, a xenophobic blue-collar worker from Queens, while his wife, Edith, was played by Jean Stapleton, who Archie often called “Dingbat.” The other two members of “the family” were their newly married daughter, Gloria (played by Sally Struthers) and her husband,

Mike Stivik (played by Rob Reiner). The show revealed the inner workings of two generations living under the same roof but looking at the world from very different perspectives. Carroll O'Connor played his role so well that he was viewed as both lovable and ridiculous.

The writer and producer, Norman Lear, would often have Archie Bunker spout out “slips of the tongue.” Lear was setting out to shake up people’s expectations and to prove to sponsors that they did not need to fear controversy. The show was described as an American version of the British *Till Death Us Do Part*. It proved to sponsors that serious issues, including racial prejudices, sexism, abortion, birth control, and sexuality could be treated in comic fashion. Critics worried that Lear was teaching a whole new generation the kinds of prejudices that liberal-leaning people had worked so hard to destroy. On the other hand, fans argued that he was making so much fun of the old prejudices that he was actually helping to enlighten people.

Here are some examples of the “slips of the tongue” that Norman Lear carefully crafted for Archie Bunker to say. We have listed them alphabetically, but as you read them, notice how they all show that Archie Bunker is uneducated. Then, see if you can decide which ones relate to prejudices against “foreigners,” minorities, or women. Archie referred to:

*Blackberry Finn* instead of *Huckleberry Finn*  
*Dunn and Broadstreet* instead of *Dunn and Bradstreet*  
*A groinocologist* instead of a *gynecologist*  
*Milton Berlin* instead of *Milton Berle*  
*Pushy Imported Ricans* instead of *Puerto Ricans*  
*A regular Marco Polish* instead of *Marco Polo*  
*Welfare incipients* instead of *Welfare recipients*.

If you were an American named *Archie* during the time that this show was wildly popular, would you have been a little offended, or embarrassed? It would be interesting to look at naming records for the United States to see if during the 1970s, the name *Archie* (usually an abbreviated version of *Archibald*) went down in popularity as a name for newly born boys. But even if it did, we couldn’t be sure that Norman Lear and his portrayal of Archie was to blame, because Norman Lear purposely chose the names of both *Archie* and his wife *Edith* because they already sounded “old-fashioned.”

Negative wordplay is more fun, because it is edgy. That’s why we often run across examples of negative wordplay that is more or less hidden inside the original words. One technique is to make the words rhyme, either internally in a created name or with a playful name that rhymes with the original name. Here are two examples:

**P. T. Loser:** Alleen’s hairdresser was discouraged when she told Alleen about how she and her husband had bought their grandson, who was a senior in high school, a new car. They bought him a Chrysler *P. T. Cruiser*, but he wasn’t



at all happy about it because the other kids at school called it a *P. T. Loser*, a term that was so common it made its way into the *Urban* dictionary.

**Edison's Medicine:** In a different sort of story, *The Week* magazine (May 18, 2012) devoted a full "Briefing" page to a story on "The Return of Electroshock Therapy." The electroshock treatment for mental illness began in the 1930s when Italian psychiatrists discovered that the suffering of mentally ill people could sometimes be helped by giving electric shocks to their brains. However, the practice was overused and sometimes was catastrophic in that it left the patient as a "vacant-minded shell." It was portrayed in the 1975 American film *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Besides calling it *Edison's Medicine*, critics began to refer to it as a *Georgia power cocktail* because of it being used at the Georgia State sanitarium in the 1940s. The news story was about how the treatment is being brought back, but with more supervision. Critics are pointing out that it should remain available only for "the most severe cases of depression," and not as a way for the medical profession to make money off "elderly depressed women on Medicare."

### English Language Learners

In the world-at-large, more people speak English as a second language than as a first language. One of the contributing factors to the ease with which people learn English is that English has borrowed words from so many languages and has kept both the English and the borrowed word. This gives speakers a second chance at understanding and remembering the meanings of pairs of words, especially if one or the other is related to their native language.

For example, we use the English word *heart*, along with the Latin *cor* and the French *coeur*. A *hearty* greeting is a cordial greeting, and if someone comes over for a visit, we might offer them a *cordial* (drink). In contrast, a person who is *disheartened* is also *discouraged*. The original meaning of *record* was to learn something *by heart*, while to have a *heart* attack is to suffer *cardiac* arrest.

Another interesting pair is the English word *hand* and the Latin word *manus*. *Handcuffs* are also called *manacles*; a *handbook* is a *manual*, and something made *by hand* is *manufactured* instead of being grown by nature. At least in the "old days," *manuscripts* were written *by hand* and *manual labor* involved working with one's *hands*. Even the word *emancipate* is related. The *Emancipation Proclamation* freed slaves from the *hands* of their owners.

*Ped* and *foot* are another pair. A *pedestrian lane* is a kind of *footpath*. If something *impedes* your progress, it is like your feet are tied. *Pedants* were the servants who walked Greek children to school – tutoring them along the way. The most far-fetched example is *pedigree* from French *pie de gris* (*foot of a crane*), named because of how the lines on genealogy charts look like the legs and feet of cranes.

*Dent* is the French word for *tooth*, which relates to the fact that we get our *teeth* fixed by the *dentist* and that false *teeth* are called *dental plates*, or *dentures*. *Hanging indentation* and *indented* paragraphs look like someone has taken out a bite, and so does a *dented* fender.

### Points of Departure

1. When Don sent out a set of photos that he had taken at a church social, he identified one of our friends as *Maureen*. She sent back a note explaining that she had been named in honor of a beloved aunt who spelled her name *Maurine*, and so she hoped Don could make the correction in his caption. Then as almost a P. S. she added, “If you have to think of *urine* to get it right, that’s okay.”

Do you have a little response of this kind that you give to people to help them remember your name or how it is spelled? Don used to explain to people who start to write out *Donald*, that “No, that’s the duck – I’m just *Don*,” but now he says, “No, it’s just Don – Donald is the President.”

2. A fellow professor, Martha Rader, sent us several little jokes that readers have created on the theme of how the United States Federal Government could come closer to the people – and thereby save money – by moving the various divisions out of Washington, DC and into real towns. Here are some of her suggestions. Explain the linguistic connection between the italicized place name and the suggested branch of the US government:

- The Internal Revenue Service should be moved to *Dodge City, Kansas*.
- The Department of Education should be moved to *Reading, Pennsylvania*.
- The Justice Department should be moved to *Truth or Consequences, New Mexico*.
- Homeland Security should be moved to *Walls, Mississippi* or maybe to *Walla Walla, Washington*.

Now that you have seen the pattern of the joke, see if you can make up a branch of the government that might be moved to the following cities, or to some other city whose name you happen to know:

- Carbondale, Illinois
- Fairbanks, Alaska
- Peculiar, Missouri
- Tombstone, Arizona.

3. When people talk about figurative language, many people use the term *puns* for most of the examples that we have talked about in this chapter, but really there are important differences between words that accidentally sound like some other word (what we call *puns*) and words that have the same linguistic source and therefore are “true relatives” or cognates of each other.
  - Explain how the history of English influences today’s vocabulary.
  - Explain how words can be semantically related to other words.
  - Contrast superficial puns (*flour* vs. *flower*) with metaphorical puns (*a human head* vs. *a head of lettuce*).
  - Explain the importance of understanding the difference between superficial puns and metaphorical puns.
4. Read these phrases and explain how the italicized words have something in common, even though some of them are based on different root words:
  - A *headline* in a newspaper ... A *footnote* in a book
  - A *vein* of ore ... An *arterial* highway
  - A *nose* for news ... *Sniffing* out the facts
  - *Capital* punishment ... The *capital* on a column
  - A faucet *nozzle* ... The *nose* cone on an airplane
  - The *facing* on a building ... *Prima facie* evidence
  - A *digital* society ... Doing something *by the numbers*
  - *Corporal* punishment ... The Marine *Corps*
  - A *skeleton* outline ... A *barebones* approach.
5. Warren S. Blumenfeld published an article in *People Magazine* (March 3, 1986) in which he brought the concept of “oxymoron” to the attention of the readers by including fourteen oxymorons in his article. Oxymorons are contradictory words. They seem to make sense because there is some kind of a relationship; however, they really contradict each other. See if you can find the oxymorons in the following sentences. Some of the sentences contain two oxymorons:
  - It was a new tradition – the First Annual Florida Snowmobilers’ Ball.
  - As he gazed across the crowded room, he saw her sitting on the real vinyl couch.
  - She was a relative stranger, but he was attracted by her seductive innocence.
  - Sophisticated good ole boy that he was, he adopted an air of studied indifference as he mused upon the planned serendipity of their meeting.

In his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), Northrop Frye stated that the four seasons (Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter) are recognized and celebrated as universal symbols of our overall life experiences. This inspired Frye to correlate particular genres of literature with particular seasons. Thus, Spring is associated with the romance, because the romance is the genre of youth, sunrise and new beginnings. The popular culture ties romance to love, while in literary criticism it is tied in with a quest and exaggerations in which the fears of nightmares are changed to the happiness of daydreams.

Spring is associated with sunrise in that spring opens the year in the same way that sunrise opens the day. Summer is associated with comedy. Symbolically, comedy is connected to the sunshine, brightness and activity that comes from vigor, strength, and vitality. The popular culture relates comedy to smiles and laughter, while literary criticism relates it to the optimistic idea that chaos and disruption will be changed to order and hope.

Just as Summer is the middle and active part of the year, daylight is the middle and active part of the day. Autumn is associated with realism, and it is a more direct representation of real life. It is less optimistic than romantic or comedic writing, and symbolically it ties to adulthood or middle age, the evening and a decrease in energy, vigor, or prestige.

Winter is associated with tragedy and irony, and the stories are associated with old age, coldness, night time, fear, discouragement, darkness, and death. Stories lack optimism and are filled with irony and pessimism. The pop culture idea is that audiences come away from tragedies such as *King Lear* (c. 1605) with renewed faith in the human spirit's ability to survive.

These connections between seasons, days, and genres are seen not only in literature, but in art and music as well. For example, Giuseppe Arcimboldo painted four heads with each one composed entirely of the fruits, vegetables, and flowers that are good representations of Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter. Antonio Vivaldi did the same thing for music in "The Four Seasons," in which he has a separate violin concerto for Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter.

*The Taming of the Shrew* (1592) and *Much Ado About Nothing* (c. 1598) are two of Shakespeare's romances. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Kate is allowed to be witty and disrespectful throughout most of the play, but of course in the final act, she is tamed. *Kiss Me Kate* (1948) is a Broadway musical based on this play. In *Much Ado about Nothing*, a romance is challenged by the wording of a letter in which Shakespeare uses the word *nothing* as a pun related to "noting." *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (c. 1595) is another Shakespeare comedy with four interconnecting plots circling around a marriage, fairies, love triangles, enchanted forests, and Nick Bottom who becomes an ass (a donkey). It has been described as "Carnavalesque," "Bacchanalian," and "Saturnalian" in tone.

*Romeo and Juliet* (c. 1591) starts out as a comedy, but then Mercutio is stabbed in a sword fight and answers the question "What, art thou hurt?" with "Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave man." At this point, the comedy turns into a tragedy. Mercutio is a mercurial figure not only because his speech is witty and slippery, but also because his death so changes the plot. *Julius Caesar* (1599) and *Richard III* (1592) are histories (realism). It's ironic that the real Julius Caesar and Richard III are not so much remembered from history books as they are remembered from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *Richard III*.

Finally, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606), *King Lear* (c. 1605) and *Hamlet* (c. 1600) are tragedies. It is our contention that the humor in Shakespeare's tragedies is more significant than is the humor in his romances, comedies, or histories. In Shakespeare's plays, as in real life, the main function of tragedy is to engage us. In a time of tragedy, we're forced to stop whatever we're doing and deal with the tragedy, but in a time of comedy, we can be free to laugh and smile and have fun without taking things seriously. This is why tragedy engages, while comedy transcends. When we watch a Shakespearean tragedy, we are engaged. We are riveted to our seats. Bad things are happening on stage, and we're concerned. We want the bad things to stop. We become more and more engaged and concerned as the wicked Lady Macbeth takes control of the plot, and as the benevolent King Lear loses power. When we have had enough, in comes the comic relief through the porter scene in *Macbeth* and through the gravediggers' scene in *Hamlet*. The play within a play in *Hamlet* is what provides the comic relief, but with very serious consequences. When Claudius asks Hamlet the name of this play, Hamlet responds, "The Mousetrap," and then goes on to say, "The play's the thing."

This alludes to how within the play, Hamlet intends to "catch the conscience of the king." In 1952, Agatha Christie opened a murder mystery in London's West End named *The Mousetrap*. This play set records for the longest-running play ever in the West End. After the refreshment of the comic relief, the audience was again able to re-engage in the tragedy until at the end of *Hamlet*, we hear the words, "Goodnight, sweet prince."

The classical distinction between comedies and tragedies is that comedies have happy endings, and tragedies have sad endings. And according to the classic definition, the fall at the end of a tragedy must be a great fall. Hamlet was the Prince of Denmark, so his fall is significant; that is, a true tragedy. However, Willie Loman, the mediocre salesman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), does not have such a high position from which to fall, so according to the classical definition, *Death of a Salesman* is not a tragedy. However, his death is significant to Willie Loman and his family, and most viewers have been led to identify with these characters and so they also think of *Death of a Salesman* as a tragedy.

Tragedy is the opposite of comedy in that the happiness appears at the beginning or the middle. Somebody is privileged, but with a fatal flaw (such as hubris or an obsession) which causes the downfall. *The Great Gatsby* (1925) is an American example, while *Othello* (1603) is known worldwide. In *Othello*, the strongest scene is the death of Desdemona when Othello says, "Put out the light, and then put out the light," as he snuffs out the flame of the candle and the life of Desdemona.

Gothic humor also fits into this dark side of life. It typically occurs in haunted houses, deep forests, or mysterious caves. The weather is dark and stormy and the eccentric characters are mysterious as shown in such books as Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Edgar Allan Poe's *The House of Usher* (1839), Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1803), Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Steven King's *Four Past Midnight* (1990) and *The Langoliers* film (1995).

People tend to create ironic humor when they feel that all is lost so there is nothing left to do but laugh at one's own predicament. The dark humor that became popular in the mid-twentieth century was created in response to fears induced by the atomic bomb and feelings of helplessness. The creators of satire, on the other hand, are purposely exposing some kind of problem and suggesting some kind of solution.

As written about in Chapter 13, there are two main kinds of satire. Horatian satire is mild and amusing. It is named for Horace, the Roman poet and writer who lived 65–08 BCE. Contemporary examples include George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1931), Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1762), and C. S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters* (1942). An ancient example is Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (411 BCE).

On the other hand, Juvenalian satire is harsh and bitter. It is named for the Latin author Juvenal, who lived in the 1st and early 2nd centuries AD. Contemporary examples include George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1948), Anthony Burgess's *Clockwork Orange* (1962), Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), Jonathan Swift's substantially older *A Modest Proposal* (1729), and Mark Twain's *The War Prayer* (1905).

In contrast to satire, gallows humor has a much broader target, and it doesn't suggest a solution. This type of novel says, "The world is crazy; just deal with it." Very often in this kind of novel readers laugh on and on until they realize the horror of what they are laughing at, and then they feel ashamed for having laughed. Examples of gallows humor include Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* (1961), J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951), Joel and Ethen Coen's *Fargo* (1996), Evelyn Waugh's *The Loved One* (1948), Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994), Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), and John Irving's *The World According to Garp* (1978).

For many literary scholars, the term "romance" is applied to a piece of literature in which good and bad are clearly distinguished, as in Steven King's *The Stand* (1978). This is not inconsistent with the popular notion that the romance is made up of the right boy meeting and interacting with the right girl. But according to Joseph Campbell, the romance also has many other important qualities. Romances relate to adventure, and adventures often include "the journey." On this journey there is the protagonist (the hero), the antagonist (the villain) and the wise man (the sage). The sage tells the hero the reason for the journey and also explains the prohibition (the thing that the hero must avoid at all cost).

However, if the heroes avoid what they are supposed to avoid, there will be no story. The hero always sacrifices something as a result of violating the prohibition. That's why Frodo has to wear the ring and consequently lose a finger when he gives up the ring. That's also why Peter Rabbit has to go into Mr. McGregor's garden, where he loses his jacket. And that's even why Adam and Eve had to eat the forbidden fruit and be cast out of the Garden of Eden, as memorialized in the fact that all men have Adam's apples.

The two most common types of comedy are comedies of humors, and comedies of manners. The term "comedy of humors" comes from the old medical belief that people's emotional makeups, that is, their dispositions, are determined by the fluids – the humors – in their bodies, which include phlegm, blood, black bile, and yellow bile. If the balance is not right a person might be "phlegmatic," "sanguine," "melancholy," or "bilious." The recommended treatment for such a person was to go to a barber shop where the barber would place leeches on the person's body to suck out all of the bad fluids, i.e. the humours. Characters in plays or novels whose humours are out of balance are called humorous characters, eccentrics, or grotesques. Many of the characters in Molière's plays, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and even in many of today's sitcoms, for example, *The Big Bang Theory*, are humorous characters.

Alazons and Eirons are stock characters based on Greek drama. Alazons are overly confident braggarts, getting their way by blustering and bullying. At the other extreme are the Eirons, who are sly rogues getting their way through feigned ignorance or dumb luck. The term "Eiron" is related to the



term “irony,” because the Eirons say one thing, but mean something else. In Japanese culture, the Samurai are the Alazons, and the Ninja are the Eirons.

Because of England’s feelings of superiority over its colonies, and because there is a clear distinction in England between the aristocracy and the serving class (often determined by their wealth and the style of language that they use), much of the humor and comedy in England fits into the category of “comedy of manners.” A clear example is George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion* (1913), which later became the Broadway play *My Fair Lady* (1956). The theme of this play is that Professor Higgins can change Eliza Doolittle (a woman of the streets) into a “proper lady” merely by teaching her correct pronunciation. In order to do this, he used such practice sentences as “The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain,” and “In Hartford, Hereford and Hampshire, hurricanes hardly ever happen.”

Eliza Doolittle is not the only character who changes or undergoes a metamorphosis. This change can also be seen in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Faust* (1925), Carlo Collodi’s *Pinocchio* (1883), and Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* (1915). Some characters are very different at the beginning and the end of a novel. These novels are in the “Bildungsroman” tradition. Additional Bildungsroman or coming-of-age novels include Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* (1749), Voltaire’s *Candide* (1759), Jane Austen’s *Emma* (1815), Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), Charles Dickens’ Pip in *Great Expectations* (1860), Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* (1936), J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), Ralph Ellison’s *The Invisible Man* (1952), and Orson Scott Card’s *Ender’s Game* (1985). Oscar Wilde’s *Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) is a Bildungsroman in reverse.

Picaresque novels are also comedies of manners; but in this case the protagonist (Seeker) is someone with no money, power, or prestige. Picares live by their wits as they encounter various powerful eccentrics in episodic adventures. Don Quixote, Huckleberry Finn, and Samuel Pickwick are examples of picares. In his *A Handbook to Literature: Twelfth Edition* (2012), William Harmon lists six characteristics associated with the picaresque novel:

1. The first-person account tells a part or the whole life of a rogue or picares.
2. Rogues and picares come from a lower social level, are of loose character, and if employed, do menial labor and live by their wits and their playful language.
3. Picaresque novels are episodic in nature.
4. Picaresque characters do not mature or develop.
5. The story is realistic. The language is plain (colloquial or vernacular) and is filled with vivid detail.
6. Picaresque characters serve other higher-class characters and learn their foibles and frailties, thus providing opportunities to satirize social castes, national types and/or racial peculiarities.

### Humor in *Harry Potter*

Within the last few decades, the most successful publishing event both for adults and children, and in both England and the United States, and in this case around the world, has been the publication of J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. A few years back, we attended a session at the Modern Language Association annual conference where one of the speakers made a presentation in which he compared the creation of names in the writings of J. R. R. Tolkien to the creation of names in the writings of J. K. Rowling. His claim was that Tolkien did a much better job of creating the names in his books than did Rowling. His reasoning was that Tolkien used the actual linguistic customs of the period – his names were “authentic,” while Rowling just “made up” her names.

During the discussion period, we wanted to stand up and ask people to hold up their fingers to show how many of Tolkien's character-names they could remember and then how many of Rowling's character-names they could remember. Of course we didn't do this because it would have been extremely rude, and also it would have continued a false comparison. Tolkien was trying to write a kind of “authentic” historical fiction, while Rowling was writing a long and involved fantasy in which she chose names that would communicate extra messages to her readers, while at the same time providing “clues” to help readers immediately “catch onto” names she had created and remember their “deep-structure” meanings, which often revealed some of the relationships, and thereby the actions, of the many characters.

In the *Harry Potter* books, there are 4,370 pages, published over a period of ten years, which means that young readers – as well as all of us adults who read the books – had to have been challenged to keep the characters, as well as the events, straight. This was a challenge because the books were not shortened, as are many books for young readers. Also, readers had to keep these things in mind during the months that transpired between the publication of the separate books. Jim Dale, the wonderful reader for the spoken audiobook editions in the US, said that during his recording of the final book in the series he had to create something like 130 different voices so as to help listeners match the quotes to the right characters.

At a different conference devoted entirely to the *Harry Potter* books, we met a woman who had been hired to translate the books into a couple of different languages. Because of our interest in names, of course we asked her how she was managing to translate the many clever names that Rowling had created both for her characters and for their charms and spells. She laughingly explained that there was no way she could be half as clever as was Rowling, and so she left the names exactly as Rowling created them. But then she quickly added that because Rowling had made such heavy use of Latin-based words, speakers

of many other languages could easily say them, and more importantly, they would at the same time catch onto their second-level meanings.

We must have still looked a little puzzled, because she went on to explain how Latin had strongly influenced the Romance languages of Italian, Spanish, and French, which in turn influenced English, as well as other languages which borrowed words and grammatical forms from the Romance languages. An additional benefit to the way that Rowling used the many Latin roots is that Latin roots are such a productive source of English that she did not need to provide a glossary of her created names. Readers already have glossaries in their own minds because most of Rowling's "made-up" names relate to not just one, but to several common English words.

After graduating from college, Rowling's first job was teaching English as a foreign language in South America. Somewhere between the publication of books Four and Six, we saw a televised interview with Rowling, where she pulled out a few of the teaching notes that she had used in her work. They were covered with hand-written notes to herself where she had jotted down connections that she happened to think of while teaching particular English words to her Spanish-speaking students.

We realize that this is a book on humor, rather than on names, but we are nevertheless relying heavily on the names that Rowling borrowed from other resources – and also created through mixing and matching different words – because they are such an efficient way to illustrate how she triggered humorous, i.e. surprising, connections in the minds of her readers. A good example is the word *Lumos!* (from the Latin roots *lumen* and *luminis*), which is the Harry Potter spell for "light." Italian readers quickly understand its meaning because of their word *luminoso*, which means "bright." French speakers use *lumineux* for what English speakers describe as *luminous*. And metaphorically, we English speakers use *illuminated* for something that has *enlightened* us by providing knowledge and understanding. A *luminary* is a prominent person known for his or her "brilliance," while in the American Southwest at Christmas time many people have borrowed the Mexican custom of setting *luminarias* on the sidewalks in front of their houses. These are small paper bags filled partially with sand in which a candle is placed to be lit at sundown.

Most speakers take this kind of information for granted without really stopping to think about the relationships that exist between Latin roots and English words. For example, even people who have taken a class in Latin are surprised to learn that the word *patter* comes from the noise heard in church when the congregants are reciting the *paternoster* ("Our Father") prayer. In a similar way when people sign a *mortgage* on their house, they probably do not think of the meaning of the Latin roots of *mors* and *mortis*, which implies that they are signing a "death" pledge on the ownership of their house. If they *amortize* their *mortgage*, they pay off the debt and thereby remove the

danger of having their house taken from them because of missing a monthly payment.

### Humorous Schemes and Tropes

*Trope* comes from a Greek word meaning “turn.” In the rhetorical sense, a trope refers to a “turn” in the way that words are being used to communicate something more than – or different from – a literal or straightforward message. Tropes are part of “deep structure” meanings and include such rhetorical devices as allegories, allusions, euphemisms, irony, metaphors, metonymy, symbolism, and synecdoche. In contrast, *scheme* comes from a word meaning “sign.” Schemes are part of the “surface structure” and include such phonological devices as alliteration, assonance, cacophony, homophones, parallelism, puns, rhyme, and rhythm.

A simple illustration of the difference between tropes and schemes are the nicknames that Rowling gives to four of her characters. A character named Lee Jordan is called *River*. Readers, at least those who have read biblical history or current news about the Jordan River, may not even realize that their brain has a little extra help in remembering that Lee Jordan is the character who is also called *River*. In a similar way, a character named Kingsley Shacklebolt is called *Royal*, which reminds readers that he is the one whose first name starts with *king*, but whose last name of *Shacklebolt* contradicts the image of a king. In contrast, the nicknames of *Cissy* and *Tuney*, which Rowling gives to Narcissa Malfoy and Petunia Dursley, exemplify schemes because the clipped or shortened form of the names is based on the sounds that Rowling purposely included when she designed the women’s given names.

When teaching such concepts, we used to overwhelm students with unfamiliar and overly complex examples, but then we decided to try teaching the concepts relying exclusively on the names that J. K. Rowling created for characters, animals, places, titles, inventions, and charms and spells. Here is our reasoning:

1. We love Rowling’s creativity, so it is fun to look for examples.
2. While these concepts of schemes and tropes go back to Aristotle and classical rhetoric, the same literary devices are very much alive in contemporary writing.
3. One reason that the Harry Potter books have such appeal to a worldwide audience is Rowling’s ability to create rhetorical density, as illustrated by how many meanings she can pack into the few short sounds needed to create a name for a person or a thing.
4. Names are an especially good source for demonstrating literary techniques because they are the only words that authors are free to create either from

already-established morphemes (the shortest parts of language that communicate meanings) or from totally original sound combinations. With all other words, authors are more or less restricted to using them with the meanings that society has previously agreed on.

We are not sure that this approach to teaching about schemes and tropes is 100 percent successful, but at least we have more fun and the lessons can be taught inductively because some students rise to the challenge of finding examples to supplement the ones we provide. And even with the less common techniques or less easily understood concepts, students are interested to realize that Rowling's creativity is more structured than accidental.

**Allegories** are extended metaphors that illustrate an important attribute of the subject. Many fantasies, including the *Harry Potter* books, are allegorical in nature. They have enough relationship to the real world that readers inductively begin making comparisons, as when Rowling describes the various prejudices that exist among the different kinds of magicians and also between magical people and *Muggles*. That Rowling creates a special name for Muggles shows that we ordinary people are the outsiders, what linguists call *the marked form*. Also, her name for *mudbloods* (people like Hermione and even Lord Voldemort who have only one magical parent) is an allegory for the way that English speakers express hostility by saying that someone's *name is mud* or the way that some people express racial prejudice by referring to someone as a *half-breed* or a *mixed-blood*.

**Allusions** are indirect references to earlier works of literature or art. Dumbledore's *Phoenix* bird is a good example of how many allusions Rowling can pack into a name. The species name of the Phoenix comes from a mythical Egyptian bird that after living for something like 599 years builds its own funeral pyre, fans the flames with its wings, and then is reincarnated. Dumbledore's Phoenix bird can do something similar. The bird's individual name of *Fawkes* appropriately begins with the sound of *Phoenix* and ends like *hawks*. It also reminds some readers of England's political rebel and martyr Guy Fawkes (1570–1606). Bonfire night (also known as Guy Fawkes' night) is celebrated on November 5 in the UK to commemorate the 1605 plot to blow up Parliament. A major instigator of the plot was a man name Guido Fawkes, i.e. Guy Fawkes. He played a major role in the Gunpowder Plot to blow up the Houses of Parliament on November 5, 1605. The event is remembered in Britain with bonfires and fireworks, along with burning effigies of Fawkes. During the nineteenth century, the name of these so-called guys made its way across the Atlantic where it was first used to refer to men, but today is used for people of both genders, as in 'you guys'. Other examples from famous old stories include the names of Percy's owl, *Hermes*, named after the messenger of the Greek gods; the egocentric *Narcissa* Malfoy, named after the conceited

young man who fell in love with his own reflection in a pool of water and drowned; the security guard at Hogwarts, *Argus Filch*, named after the 100-eyed monster who was killed by Hermes; the wise Professor *Minerva* McGonagall, named after the Roman goddess of wisdom and war; and the snake *Nagini*, who holds part of Lord Voldemort's soul and is named after the cobras, *Nag* and *Nagini*, in Rudyard Kipling's *Rikki-Tikki-Tavi* tales from India.

**Archaisms** are old-fashioned words and phrases that lend a sense of dignity or mysticism to an author's work. One way Rowling does this is to rely on Latin roots for such spells as *Cruciatius*, which is an unforgivable curse that causes intense pain. The root is *Crux*, meaning a "gallows" or "cross" as seen in the English phrase, "your cross to bear," and in such terms as *crucial*, to *crucify*, and *crucifix*. In a less somber example, she uses the old-fashioned *mead* (a Greek word for *wine*) in the name of the town of *Hogsmeade*, where wizards go to *The Hog's Head* inn and *The Three Broomsticks* bar and restaurant to drink such concoctions as *Elderflower*, instead of *Elderberry* wine, and *Butterbeer*, instead of buttermilk or root beer.

**Circumlocution** means "talking around" a topic, as when we euphemize, which means to use beautiful or *euphonious* words in place of ordinary words. For example, the curse *Impedimenta!* (from *impede*) sounds more euphonious than "Trip him!" or "Tie his feet." The name of *Maxime Olympe* makes readers think of such words as *maximum* and *Olympus*. She is a giant but prefers to describe herself as "large-boned." This is euphemistic enough that readers can be amused rather than embarrassed when Rowling lightens the sadness of Professor Dumbledore's funeral by saying that Madame Maxime took up two-and-a-half of the folding chairs that had been set out on the lawn.

**Hyperbole** is the use of exaggerated terms for emphasis, as with the trick candy named *Ton Tongue Toffee*. This candy makes the eater's tongue grow huge, but certainly no one's tongue could weigh a ton. *Auxesis* is a form of hyperbole, in which more important-sounding words are used in place of ordinary descriptive terms, as when the *Petrificus Totalus!* charm sounds more important than does "totally paralyze," just as *Priori Incantatem!* sounds more important than "What you just said."

**Incongruity, Irony, Paradox, and Oxymoron** are related concepts in which contradictory ideas are stated for a variety of purposes. Incongruity occurs when an author surprises readers by doing the opposite of what one would expect. Because Rowling creates exotic and strange names for most of her characters, including for many who are Muggles (non-magicians), readers probably expect that she would give the strangest-sounding names to the most magical of her characters, but the names she gives to the members of the most important magical family are so ordinary (*Arthur, Molly, Fred, Percy, Charlie, George, Bill, Ron, and Ginny*) that they stand out as incongruous when compared to other character names such as *Stan Shunpike, Nymphadora Tonks,*



*Bellatrix LeStrange*, and *Pius Thicknesse*. In most writing, it would be the latter names that would stand out as incongruous. Rowling also uses incongruities to remind readers that they are in a fantasy world, as when she refers to such impossibilities as *Decoy Detonators*, *Headless Hats*, *Snargaluff Juice*, and *Dr. Filibuster's Fabulous Wet-Start, No-Heat Fireworks Shop*. And while *Fanged Frisbees*, *Extendable Ears*, and *Ever-Bashing Boomerangs* may not be impossible, they present incongruous images.

**Innuendo** relates to extra meanings that are so subtle only some readers catch onto them. The primary purpose of a name is simply to identify someone, so if a name happens to have another meaning those readers who understand the allusion get something extra. An obvious example is the name of Harry's mother, *Lily*. In the language of flowers, lilies stand for purity. In contrast, Lily's sister, *Petunia*, who serves as Harry's foster mother, has the name of a flower that stands for anger and resentment. Both ideas are supported throughout the series, as well as in real life when we look at which kind of flower people provide for funerals.

**Meiosis** is the use of understatement to diminish the importance of something. Rubeus Hagrid, who takes care of the animals at Hogwarts, is a master at this. He calls the vicious and powerful three-headed dog that guards the Sorcerer's Stone *Fluffy*. And when his Hippogriff (a huge and powerful creature with the hindquarters of a horse and the head, beak, and wings of an eagle) gets in trouble for helping Sirius Black escape, Hagrid, in an amusing case of giving a name more power than it deserves, changes Buckbeak's name to the humble-sounding *Witherwings*. That Rowling believes in the power of meiosis is also shown by her *Riddikulus!* charm that students are taught to use to turn a *Boggart* (a fearsome creature) into something amusing or laughable.

**Metaphors** and **Similes** are comparisons. Similes are more obvious because the author identifies them as a comparison by using such terms as *like* or *as*. Rowling does this when in Book Seven she says that Bathilda Bagshot is "as nutty as squirrel poo." However, in Rowling's fantasy world she is more likely not to tell her readers that she is making a comparison (as is done with a simile) but instead to just present concepts and leave it to her readers to make the connections. While some critics interpret metaphors in a general way to include practically all of the techniques we are writing about, other critics prefer a more limited definition. People have to bring their own life experiences to interpret metaphors, and so some, but not all, readers interpret *The Thief's Downfall* as a kind of Christian baptism. It is a waterfall in Gringotts Bank which washes away or steals all charms and enchantments meant to conceal an individual's true identity.

A metaphor that has a more universal application is *The Order of the Phoenix*, which is a metaphor for rebirth and for making the world right after things have gone terribly wrong. On the other side, the *Death Eaters* are metaphors



for horror and the end of the world. In trying to answer the great questions of life, people are forced to use metaphors as shown by the riddle in Book Seven, “Which came first, the Phoenix or the flame?” The answer is “A circle has no beginning.”

**Metonymy** and **Synecdoche** occur when people refer to something by using a word that is associated with whatever is being named. For example, *Voldemort*’s name appropriately translates into “running from death,” while the name of *Rufus Scrimgeour*, the Minister of Magic who is constantly obscuring the truth, might remind readers of the scrim that is used in theaters to partially obscure scenes from the audience’s view. *Dolores Umbridge*, who is temporarily appointed to be the headmistress at Hogwarts, has a first name that means “sad or doleful.” Her surname is just two letters away from *umbrage*, which is related to the idea of “shade” as seen literally in *umbrella* and metaphorically in “taking umbrage” as suspecting someone of shady dealings, or feeling pique or resentment.

Geographical allusions often serve as the basis for associations. For example, the German-sounding name that Rowling gave to the *Wizengemot* has different connotations (because it starts with a reminder of the word *wise*), from the Middle Eastern-sounding name of the *Azkaban* prison. Rowling gives several of her characters names that communicate their ethnicity, as with the Chinese student *Cho Chang*, the student from India named *Padma Patil*, and the Bulgarian quidditch player, *Viktor Krum*. Synecdoche is a type of metonymy in which a part of whatever is being named stands for the whole, as when Rowling names Hagrid’s dog *Fang*, Hermione’s cat *Crookshanks*, the werewolf who bit Remus Lupin *Greyback*, and a goblin who holds onto the *Gringotts Bank* treasures *Griphook*. The names of *Neville Longbottom* and *Alastor “Mad-Eye” Moody* are especially memorable because of the imagery.

**Paralipsis or adophasis** is the technique of invoking an idea by denying its invocation; that is, drawing attention to something while pretending to pass it over. There could hardly be a better example of this than the way Rowling has almost everyone, with the exception of Harry, show their fear and respect for Lord Voldemort by refusing to say his name. Instead they refer to him as *He-who-must-not-be-named*, *You-know-who*, and *The Dark Lord*. Rowling hints that Harry is in some ways an equal to Lord Voldemort by having some people avoid using Harry’s name. Those who are on the side of good refer to him with respect as *The Boy Who Lived* and *The Chosen One*, while those on the side of evil refer to him as *Undesirable Number One*.

**Periphrasis**, the Latinate form of our English word *paraphrase*, refers to the substituting of a word or phrase for someone’s proper name, as when Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington, the resident ghost of Gryffindor Tower, is called *Nearly Headless Nick* because he died in a botched beheading where the sword did not cut all the way through. As a result, he must hold his head

straight and wear high collars to keep his head from dangling. *The Grey Lady* is an alternate way to refer to Helena Ravenclaw, the daughter of the founder of Ravenclaw House, while *Moaning Myrtle* is a descriptive way to refer to the ghost who haunts one of the bathrooms at Hogwarts.

**Personification** is the attribution of human qualities to inanimate objects, animals, or natural phenomena. Without personification, Rowling could not have created her fantasy world in which she gives human-sounding names, as well as human emotions, to such animals as *Aragog*, a member of a species of giant spiders called *acromantula*, and to *Norbert*, a Norwegian Ridgeback Dragon whose name is changed to *Norberta* when she turns out to be female. A docile and helpful house elf is named *Dobby*, perhaps because he is always “daubing up” messes, while another house elf is temperamental and a troublemaker named *Kreacher*, perhaps to remind readers that he isn't quite human.

Rowling takes personification a step further when she begins giving human-like emotions and actions to plants, as she does with the *Whomping Willow* tree that guards the entrance to the secret tunnel, and also with the *Devil's Snare* that is brought into St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. It is disguised as “an innocent *Flitterbloom*.” Even though plants are not sentient beings, they are living, so this isn't quite the stretch it is when Rowling gives names to something like magicians' wands as with *The Death Stick*, *Wand of Destiny*, and *Elder Wand*.

**Synesis** is related to the word *synonym* and refers to puns in which words have similar meanings but differ in grammatical form. The concept is also referred to as *Polyptoton*. While most puns are considered to be schemes, we are including this type as a trope because they are based on words that are semantically related rather than on words that just happen to sound the same. An example is how Rowling uses the name of the real *King's Cross* railway station in London and has Harry leave on the Hogwarts Express from *Platform Nine and Three-Quarters*. Both the name of the track and the name of the station foreshadow the fact that when Harry leaves the station he will be “crossing over” into a different world. To further the idea that things in this new world are aslant from the Muggle world, Rowling changes the adverb *diagonally* into a proper noun, *Diagon Alley*.

### Humorous Allusions to Children's Literature

A general illustration of how real life can change people's perception of what seems funny relates to the general economic downturn that the US suffered after the turn of the century. Over the past few years, Alleen has noticed that her children's literature students do not have as much fun as they used to through collecting allusions, because the creators of mass media messages

have not been as light-hearted as they were in the 1990s. As 2000 rolled in, the allusions to children's literature have been either reminders of how bad things are, or they have been so agenda-driven that many students felt offended rather than amused.

For example, in earlier years, a full-page advertisement for US Plywood alluded to "This Is the House that Jack Built," by showing an adoring wife cuddled up to her proud husband and bragging, "This is the room that Herb paneled." Students laughed not only because the couple was so cute, but also because it showed how women have lowered expectations for what they think their husbands can accomplish.

In contrast to this loving picture was a 2005 cartoon drawn by Tom Beck in which the proverbial *Jack* is standing alongside "The house that Jack built," with a screw through his belly. Next to him were a bureaucrat and a Supreme Court justice holding up *Eminent Domain* and *Public Use* signs. The cartoonist was protesting the Supreme Court decision affirming the power of either state or national governments to take land and/or buildings from private citizens if they were needed for some community use. Cartoonist Don Landgren used Dorothy and Toto from *The Wizard of Oz* to make the same point. The two are standing next to a Supreme Court justice holding a paper headlined, "Sic: Eminent Domain Ruling." Dorothy is nostalgically saying, "There's no place like home," when a Supreme Court Justice interrupts to finish her statement with "... to take for business development and more taxes, My Pretty."

Probably helped along by the success of Gregory Maquire's *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*, both as a book and a musical, and by celebrations of the 100th anniversary of the original *Oz* book and the 70th anniversary of the film, allusions to the *Wizard of Oz* appeared in several recent cartoons, most with a menacing tone. In one, the Wicked Witch is saying, "Forget the slippers, I want Tin Man's Oil," while in another, Dorothy and her friends have sold the Tin Woodman to a recycling center in exchange for the bus fare to get back to Kansas.

We used to see *The Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe* in cheerful advertisements such as one where she happily served Hawaiian punch to all her children, but lately one cartoon shows her empty shoe bearing a *FORECLOSURE* sign, while another shows a realtor standing in front and saying to a colleague, "It looked kinda dumpy, but appraised at a million-two." In a 2007 cartoon, Lucas Turnbloom drew a puzzled Winnie-the-Pooh saying, "Oh, Bother," when he sees that the "100-Acre Realty" has posted a *FORECLOSURE* sign on Mr. Sander's tree-trunk.

Early cartoons about Harry Potter were based on amazement at the books' popularity. For example, aliens from outer space are asking to be taken to "Your leader, that person called Harry Potter," and the Incredible Hulk is being hushed by a little girl holding a Harry Potter book and saying, "Can't you see

I'm reading!" The cartoonist's cutline for this one pointed out that there's still hope for America's children.

More recently, serious politicians have been alluding to the darker side of the Harry Potter books, especially to the villain, Lord Voldemort, popularly known as *He-who-must-not-be-named*. One of the nastiest cartoons alluding to Harry Potter was drawn in 2009 by Rob Rogers for the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. It showed the marquee of a movie theater decorated with signs featuring "Dick Cheney and the Torturer's Stone," and "Dick Cheney and the Chamber of Secrets," and on through four other political scandals. The caption was "When will this agonizing franchise end?" Another incident that made us sad was seeing the old nursery rhyme phrase, "Liar, Liar, Pants on Fire!" professionally printed on a protest sign telling House Speaker Nancy Pelosi that "Botox Can't Keep *The Brain* young!" We would much rather see allusions from children's literature adding a humorous touch to political dissent, rather than being used as hate-speech.

### Points of Departure

1. For each season of the year (Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter) give an example of a symbol, other than those talked about in the chapter, that is representative of 1. Romance, 2. Comedy, 3. Realism, and 4. Tragedy.
2. Bring in a book of old, familiar nursery rhymes that are often read to young children. Read them and try to decide if they fit mainly into one of the four modes (Romance, Comedy, Realism, and Tragedy) or if they are a combination of more than one. You might also enjoy doing this with old fairy tales, such as "The Three Bears," "The Three Billy Goats Gruff," and "The Three Little Pigs." Does the story move from one mode to another? If so, where does the tension come in?
3. Choose a specific topic, for example, popular songs, types of cars, kinds of food, colors, or even hairstyles, that could be made to serve as representatives of the four types of genres. If you are in a literature class, look back at something all of you have read and see if you can pick out how some of the elements of the story support one or the other of the ideas expressed in this chapter. For example, in a romance, the female character is usually more likely to be tied in with romance and comedy, while the male character might be tied in with realism or even with tragedy. Can you think of a story or a movie where this is the case? Or of one where the opposite is portrayed?

4. Because J. K. Rowling has so much fun with words, here we are sneaking in various kinds of wordplay. For example, see who can be the first in the class to match up the “beginnings” with the “endings” in this set of puns:

When fish are in schools ...	... were given out free of charge.
The dead batteries ...	... they sometimes take debate.
We'll never run out of math teachers ...	... in Los Angeles, UCLA.
To write with a broken ...	... because they always multiply.
When the smog lifts ...	... pencil is pointless.

Here is a similar kind of wordplay called *anaprosdokians*. The joke comes because the last part of the sentence is unexpected.

I didn't say it was your fault ...	... I want to be in it.
I used to be indecisive ...	... we would both be wrong.
If I agreed with you ...	... now I'm not so sure.
Where there's a will ...	... I said I was blaming you.

In his books, Professor John Morreall explains that “Relief Theory” has two forms. Humor can be a relief from pre-existing nervous energy, as when rambunctious kids are forced to sit quietly for a long time. Once the pressure is off, they often resort to horseplay and to buffoonery and laughter. The second kind is the “set-up” for a joke or cartoon that may require concentration, attention to detail, and emotional engagement. The punch line is a release of either type of pent-up energy. To illustrate the second point, Morreall provides the following poem:

I had written to Aunt Maud  
Who was on a trip abroad  
Then I heard she'd died of cramp,  
Just too late to save a stamp.

Most humor scholars, along with many health practitioners, agree that humorous laughter has positive physical effects. It lowers the level of stress hormones (epinephrine, cortisol, dopa, and growth hormone). And it causes catecholamines to be secreted in the brain, which may increase alertness, reduce inflammation, and trigger the release of endorphins, which are the brain's natural opiates. At one of our April Fools' Day Humor Conferences, a psychiatrist who had a charming Boston accent won the joke-telling contest by presenting a joke that he had heard from a patient. Afterwards when a newspaper reporter was interviewing the winner, he asked the doctor if he encourages his patients to tell jokes as a way of finding out what is going on in their heads. “Absolutely not!” the doctor replied. “We tell jokes to each other to become friends. Never underestimate the power of a doctor bonding with his patients.”

To us, this kind of bonding, i.e. making friends through sharing humor, is one of the main ways that humor can contribute to good health, although we have met many people who have higher expectations than we do for humor in relation to health. Norman Cousins (1915–1990) is probably more responsible than any other person for having promoted the idea that humor can be a curative. He did this through his 1979 book, *Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient: Reflections on Healing and Regeneration*. In the 1960s, Cousins

had returned exhausted from a trip to the Soviet Union. His immune system was down and he fell ill with a serious collagen disease that affected the connective tissue in his spine and joints. The disease was life-threatening, his pain was intense, and doctors gave him little hope of a full recovery.

During the course of his treatment, he grew so frustrated with hospital routines and the slow progress he was making that he checked himself out of the hospital and moved across the street into a nearby hotel. He was close enough that his doctors could still see and care for him, but he was free enough to put into practice his own ideas of what he called a humor-intervention therapy in which he read books by his favorite humorous authors and watched Marx Brothers films and tapes of *Candid Camera* and other television shows that he enjoyed. He found that the more he laughed at something, the longer his body was without pain.

Cousins recovered from the illness, at least well enough to live for twenty-six more years after his diagnosis and to continue working and writing. He was a wonderful writer and editor, as shown by the fact that between 1942 and 1972, when he edited the *Saturday Review of Literature*, the subscription base rose from 20,000 to 650,000. It was probably his skill as a writer, as much as his experience with his illness, that made his book a best-seller. When we make humor-related presentations to senior citizens, there is nearly always someone in the audience who has read *Anatomy of an Illness* and is enthusiastic enough to want to tell the rest of us about how humor can help people.

We are always happy that people know about Cousins' book, but we were disheartened when one of our neighbors, whose mother had recently died from cancer, stopped by our house and sadly told us that she had gotten her mother funny video tapes and joke books, "but she just died anyway." We worried that maybe in a presentation somewhere we had "overpromised" the benefits of humor in relation to health, or perhaps our neighbor was just sharing her disappointment because she thought that as "experts" in humor, we needed to know that humor does not have the power to cure all illnesses.

The Bible says, "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine, but a broken spirit drieth the bones" (Proverbs 17:22). There are many people who spend their lives promoting this simple truth, including Patch Adams, Rod Martin, Mary Kay Morrison, Paul McGhee, Vera Robinson, and Patty Wooten, who is known for disguising herself as "Nancy Nurse." In 1971, William Fry, who taught in the Medical School of Stanford University, began empirical studies on the effects of humor and laughter on the body. He went beyond anecdotal stories by objectively testing and measuring physical responses to humor. He found that the chemical composition of tears that are shed by someone laughing is different from the chemical composition of tears that come to the eyes of a person who is crying from sadness or shock. He also demonstrated that people's bodies are tense when listening to a joke, but relaxed at the end (after the



punch-line). He compared the body's production of dopamine when laughing to a runner's high, which is why he calls laughter "internal jogging." William Fry's well-documented studies have done much to improve the reputation of the field of Humor Studies as a legitimate academic discipline. It was mainly because of the findings of Norman Cousins and William Fry that an important organization was formed – The Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor – which is devoted to studying and promoting the health benefits of humor.

Rod Martin and his colleagues in Canada have found that affiliative and self-enhancing humor is potentially beneficial, and that aggressive and self-defeating humor is potentially detrimental. Anyone doing research with humor and health needs to be aware of these differences. Martin works with a "State-and-Trait Cheerfulness Inventory," which defines a sense of humor as an emotional temperament that is habitually cheerful and playful. This matches the way humor is most often conceptualized in the humor and health literature. However, Martin warns against "simplistic, exaggerated, and unsubstantiated research." He is especially critical of methodological weaknesses in the research on humor and the immune system. For example, he makes the point that if humor enhances the immune system (which it does), then this enhanced immunity could be a problem for patients with implants, because the enhanced immunity might trigger their bodies into rejecting the implants. Martin concluded that despite reports in the popular media, the research findings on the health benefits of humor and laughter are not as strong, consistent or unambiguous as sometimes claimed.

We recently reviewed a 2014 book by Rebecca Krefting, *All Joking Aside: American Humor and its Discontents*, which was published by Johns Hopkins University Press. The author defines her subject as "charged humor," which she explains is similar to Sigmund Freud's concept of tendentious humor, except that tendentious humor reveals things about the individual, while charged humor "reveals things about society, gender, politics, race, and poverty." At the same time that it makes people laugh, it is also serious in targeting racist, sexist, and bigoted actions that are intended to keep marginalized people "in their place." Krefting explains that charged humor, like charged electricity, is powerful because it both repels and attracts as it takes people out of their comfort zones.

We were impressed that Krefting went beyond citing only comics who have "made it." She also introduces readers to younger comedians still working their way up, and in addition to quoting their best jokes, she illustrates their use of timing, tone, and body language. She notes that some of the humor on *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, and *Bill Maher* is charged humor, but most of it, along with the humor on late-night talk shows, is "pseudo-critical," seldom taking a strong stance on issues. In contrast, charged humor seeks to remedy

the experiences of second-class citizenship by celebrating and developing cultural citizenship among sexually, racially, ethnically, corporeally, materially, or otherwise marginalized individuals.

She quotes Dick Gregory as saying that “Lenny Bruce shakes up the Puritans, Mort Sahl the Conservatives, and me – almost everybody.” Then she goes on to cite such comics from the 1950s to the mid-1980s as Redd Foxx, Moms Mabley, Rusty Warren, Phyllis Diller, Robin Tyler, George Carlin, Totie Fields, and Richard Pryor, all of whom integrated charged humor into their acts to promote social justice. Tyler championed sexual diversity, while Gregory and Pryor championed racial equality, often by making fun of blacks.

Early on, such comedy clubs as the *hungry I*, the *Purple Onion*, and the *Playboy Club* were being developed in San Francisco, Chicago, and New York, while in the 1950s both Nixon and McCarthyism were springboards for dissent. Lenny Bruce didn’t create comedy so much as hold up a mirror to show what society really looked like. Dick Gregory talked about the Ku Klux Klan, sit-ins, voting rights, and access to education. Lily Tomlin took on the roles of Edith Ann, a precocious and observant 5-year-old, and of Ernestine, a nasal-voiced telephone operator with a loud and distinctive snort that she used to deride other people’s ideas about patriarchy, capitalism, conventionality, and other naïve attitudes. George Carlin was criticizing censorship when he developed his “Seven Dirty Words that you Can’t Say on Television,” but that he was soon able to say on HBO, and on early pay-per-view systems in the United States.

Bill Maher uses charged jokes to point out that religion has been responsible for most of the world’s “big wars” including the Crusades, the Inquisition, and Nine-Eleven. But skipping forward a couple of decades, comedian Patten Oswalt presents a different take on religion. He says religions promise a city in the clouds and lots of cake. He concluded with the idea that the next time you see people carrying signs or shouting at an abortion clinic or trying to ban *Harry Potter*, just think of all that “sky cake” and you’ll be able to understand why they’re doing it.

This fits with the major idea behind Krefting’s book, which is that we are laughing our way into the new millennium by celebrating the paradigm shift that has come out of the concept of political correctness. George Lopez has been criticized for “selling out,” but he responds that he has to perform “safe comedy” in order to become well-enough established to have the freedom and the commercial power to use more charged humor. Like many of today’s comics, Daniel Tosh targets “the haves.” He got big laughs when, during the last Winter Olympics, he said the only reason we have Winter Olympics is to make white people feel relevant in sports. Then he went on to explain that what the Winter Olympics show is which country has the most rich, white kids – those whose parents can pay for lots of equipment, lessons, and lift-fees.

Wanda Sykes surprised listeners by saying that it is harder being gay than being black. As proof, she explained that she didn't have to "come out black," or to sit down with her parents and explain to them about her blackness. Football is Dick Gregory's favorite sport because only in football can a Negro chase a white man and cause 40,000 people to stand up and cheer. B-Phlat explains how for black people, running is a different experience than it is for white people, as shown by how white people get out of bed and go running for exercise, but when people see a black person running they know that something bad has happened.

Daniel Tosh has no problem with illegal immigrants except that they can't serve on jury duty. In Tosh's opinion, they should be the only ones serving on jury duty. "Then it finally would be a jury of one's own peers." Then he adds with a smirk, "It's not a stereotype if it's always true."

When Hari Kondabolu was in Arizona, a heckler shouted, "Hey! We're just trying to bring the country back to the way it used to be!" Kondabolu responded, "Lady, you're in Arizona. It used to be Mexico!"

Kondabolu also has a funny routine about white chocolate. Was it invented because "you love the taste of chocolate, but can't stand looking at it?" Then, he adds "that white chocolate was brought to you by the same people who brought you white Jesus." When a woman in his audience objected by saying that Jesus was white, he responded that both of Jesus' parents were from the Middle East. A second woman jumped in by explaining that "one of Jesus' parents was God, and God is white." At this point reason went out the window, but comedy had already flown in, so we will end this discussion of Krefling's book with an observation that she quoted from Andy Medhurst's *A National Joke: Popular Comedy and English Cultural Identities* (2007):

One of my main contentions is that any analytical consideration of how ideologies of belonging are forged and sustained through cultural forms need to give comedy a prominent place, since laughing together is one of the most swift, charged, and effective routes to a feeling of belonging together. Comedy is a shortcut to community.

### **Patch Adams: A Cultural Icon**

At least in the United States, if someone mentions the idea of humor as a contributor to good health, the first name that will come to mind for ordinary Americans, as opposed to humor scholars, will be that of Patch Adams. Adams was born in Washington, DC in 1945 and was named Hunter Doherty Adams.

When Hunter was growing up, he and his brother and mother lived in Germany so as to be near his father, who was an American Army officer during the Korean conflict. However, when his father was killed, the two teenage boys and their mother moved back to the United States and lived in suburban Virginia, close to Washington, DC. Hunter had a hard time adjusting to an

American high school and three different times he was hospitalized for trying to commit suicide. Finally, he says, he came to the realization that “You don’t kill yourself, Stupid; you make revolution,” and from then on this is what he has done, but in unexpected ways.

When he graduated from Wakefield High School, he began taking pre-med coursework at George Washington University. In the late 1960s, one of his closest friends was murdered. In the *Patch Adams* movie that in 1998 was made about his life, the friend was portrayed as a female, but the friend was really a male. Anyway, the point of having the event in the film is that the death was a trauma in his life and contributed to Adams’ desire to become a physician.

As soon as he had taken the basic pre-med program (he did not wait to get his diploma), he enrolled for a Doctor of Medicine degree at Virginia Commonwealth University, which was part of the Medical College of Virginia. As a student, he worked part-time in a clinic for teenagers that was part of the program at MCV. This experience convinced him more than ever that the health of individuals cannot be separated from the health of the family, the community, and the world. While working in the clinic, he met Linda Edquist, a fellow student who volunteered at the clinic. They married in 1975 and in due time, Linda gave birth to two sons that they named Atomic Azgnut “Zag” Adams and Lars Zig Edquist Adams. The couple divorced in 1998, but Adams, who by now was going by his chosen name of “Patch,” remained close to his sons.

Soon after graduation, Hunger “Patch” Adams, with help from Linda and friends, founded the *Gesundheit! Institute*. His eventual goal, which he is still working at, was to provide free health care – influenced by his belief in the importance of humor – for people who could not afford regular doctors and medical care. Skeptics referred to him and the other people who had joined in with the idea of the *Gesundheit! Institute* as “the Zanies,” but still they managed to establish a “Not-for-profit” health care institution, which operated for a few years in Pocahontas County, West Virginia. The land is still owned by the *Gesundheit! Institute*, and Adams still dreams of rounding up enough money to build his “dream” hospital.

Adams’ biggest fame came in 1998 when the story of his life was told in a 55-minute film entitled *Patch Adams*. It starred Robin Williams and was successfully released in regular theaters throughout the United States. Credit for writing the story was given to Patch Adams and Maureen Mylander. A recent Wikipedia description of the moderately popular film described it as grossing \$202.30 million, while the estimated budget was \$90 million. It was “based on the true story of a misfit medical student whose unconventional healing causes headaches for the medical establishment but works wonders for the patients.”

Early on, Adams was less than gracious in praising the way that Robin Williams acted out the real life of Patch Adams. Plus, he was irritated that

Williams didn't donate some of the money that the film made to the *Gesundheit! Institute*. But when in 2014 Robin Williams committed suicide, Adams was more effusive in praising Williams' talent. However, in the obituaries that we read for Robin Williams, no one mentioned the *Patch Adams* film as one of Williams' successes. In fact, when the *Patch Adams* film was originally released most reviewers were highly critical, not so much of the acting as of the "schmaltzy" storyline. Roger Ebert wrote that it made him "want to spray the screen with Lysol," while Joe Leydon in *Variety* wrote, "There should be a special room in Hell where the makers of films like *Patch Adams* are sent."

Judging by the most recent address we have for Adams, he is now living in Urbana, Illinois and for much of the year he is organizing and taking groups of fun-loving people on trips as co-partners in bringing a few moments of fun and happiness to people – especially children – in troubled areas of the world. However, he still has hopes of getting enough money to build a functioning hospital on the land that the *Gesundheit! Institute* still owns in West Virginia.

### Humor and Our Bodies

Part of the process of becoming a medical doctor is to study the anatomy of the human body. Of course, all doctors need to be very familiar with body parts and body functions. When we talk about these body parts or body functions we usually use longer and more polite terms, often from Latin, Greek, or French, like "vagina," "derrière," "penis," "mammary glands," "perspiration," "defecation," "urination," "intercourse," "intestines," or "saliva." These longer expressions are called "inkhorn terms" because they are more likely to occur in writing than in speech. In contrast, there are the street-language terms or four-letter Germanic words, which are spoken rather than written down because many of them are considered obscene or taboo. In jokes about the body – unless the joke is designed to make fun of the formalities of the medical profession – the shorter words will probably be used.

Those of us who study humor must be cautious not to oversell the positive effects that humor has on health. Sven Svebak and his colleagues in Norway administered a sense of humor questionnaire to 65,000 adults in the country of Norway. These researchers were searching for correlations between a person's sense of humor and symptoms of illness such as nausea, diarrhea, pounding heart, muscular-skeletal pain, blood pressure, obesity, and overall health satisfaction. After controlling for age, no meaningful relationships were found between sense of humor and symptoms of illness. The researchers concluded that although high-humor individuals do not seem to have objectively better health, they are somewhat more subjectively satisfied with their health.

In his *The Laughter Remedy: Health, Healing and the Amuse System* (1991), Paul McGhee mentions these kinds of criticism, but nevertheless advises

people to “become more playful, surround yourself with humor you enjoy, begin telling jokes and funny stories, and learn to laugh at yourself.” John Morreall is another humor scholar who stresses the benefits of humor as related to health. Morreall says that laughter increases blood circulation, ventilates the lungs, decreases water vapor and carbon dioxide in the lungs and decreases the risk of pulmonary infection. Nevertheless, Rod Martin cautions that hearty laughter may also have associated effects, because while extroverts tend to laugh more, they are also more likely to drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes, and overeat.

### **How Medical Practitioners Joke**

Nurses have told us about reproducing and sending only to their best friends the mistakes that have been written in a doctor’s log book, or the funny situations that have brought patients in to see the doctor, as with the frantic mother who rushed her 2-year-old to the doctor to ask if it was okay “if he drank dog’s milk – I mean he sucked it right out of the dog?” This kind of humor is probably not going to be put on a public website, and even with close friends it will more likely be told rather than written out. Patients would be indignant – and some would probably sue – if their own little stories were found online.

Both nurses and doctors have shared such “funny events” with us on a one-to-one basis, but the purpose has not been to make fun of their patients or of themselves, but simply to lighten things up, as when they are getting ready to give us a shot or when cutting off a dangerous-looking mole to send in for a biopsy. They are doing verbally the same thing that a cartoon we happened to see on a hospital bulletin board did visually. It was a drawing of an overweight man in one of those tie-in-the-back hospital gowns who was walking down the hall in front of two nurses and was saying to himself – or maybe to the nurses – “Now I know why they call it the ICU ward.”

A nursing joke that we remember from long ago was about a nurse trying to hear the heartbeat of a talkative little girl. In trying to settle her down, the nurse said, “Shhh ... be quiet so I can hear if Barney’s in your heart.” (Barney was a friendly dinosaur on television that was popular at the time). The little girl indignantly retorted, “Jesus is in my heart! Barney’s on my underpants.”

It’s interesting that one of the places to find humor is at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, where humor helps transcend the moment and helps attendees attain a broader perspective. One member told how even when she was drunk or hungover, she tried to be what society expected her to be. She volunteered to help with her son’s Cub Scout troop on a day they were sewing moccasins. Of course she got a laugh when she reported, “I remember sewing it – honest-to-God I can still feel it – onto my finger.”

Some hospitals have humor rooms or humor carts managed by clowns who interact with the patients to make them feel better, at least for a while. Other

than getting help in bringing humor inside hospitals from members of service organizations, most of the informal humor in hospitals is provided not by the doctors, but by the nurses who spend more time interacting with the patients. Because nurses work more closely with the patients than do the doctors, they get to know the patients better, and also the patients get to know the nurses. However, nurses are often caught in the middle of a hierarchy, and so they gain power by joking and clowning around with the patients, sometimes at the expense of the doctors. Patty Wooten (as Nancy Nurse) sometimes wears clown shoes, a clown face and a clown-nurse dress. When she is doing a program or setting up a humor lounge, for example, she will also adorn herself with some of the items associated with nurses, such as a bed pan, a giant needle, or a stethoscope. These are her Nancy-Nurse props. However, when she is on duty, working in a hospital unit that requires specific uniforms, she wears her regular nurse outfit, with a pin identifying herself as “Nancy Nurse: Plain Clothes Division.” Clowns are becoming more and more important in American hospitals. There are now more than 100 US hospitals where clowns roam the halls, push humor carts, and give out smiley faces, joke books, and clown dolls.

The idea that humor can cure – or at least alleviate – some of the pain that sick people experience is such a wish-fulfilling idea that it is no wonder that many people have jumped on the bandwagon. You will probably be surprised at how many websites you can find under such titles as “Health Benefits of Humor” and “Living a Healthy and Happy Life.” Even the Mayo Clinic sponsors a website entitled, “Stress Relief from Laughter – It’s No Joke.” Finding and studying such websites is all to the good, but still here are some “second thoughts” for people who want to make sure that they are helping the situation more than hurting it. So consider these paradoxes:

1. Even if we had well-documented evidence that people with a sense of humor live longer, how would we know that their sense of humor is the cause? There is probably a circular relationship in that individuals who are healthy and whose lives are going well are more likely to be happy and to produce humor on their own, as well as to appreciate whatever humor comes their way.
2. When people are sick, could it be that those patients who are pleasant and find things to smile about have broader support groups so that they have more visitors and also develop better relationships with their caregivers and hence get better care?
3. While it is true that a hearty laugh pumps adrenalin and other “good” chemicals into people’s bloodstreams, we need to remember that other positive emotions do the same thing. For example, in some hospitals, volunteers bring pets in to visit with patients, and throughout the United States many more hospitals have chapels than have humor rooms, and more people are visited by members of the clergy than by “clowns.” Perhaps



researchers should be comparing the results of these visits with the results of visits made for the specific purpose of amusing or entertaining patients, but who would dare to ask kindly visitors (especially men or women from the clergy) to submit to having their actions examined and their success compared to that of “clowns” or of friendly dogs? NOTE: The reason that we put “clowns” in quotation marks is that after the fall of 2016, when all around the world “creepy clowns” caused panics and police arrests throughout the United States, as well as in fourteen other countries, the centuries-old idea of “clowns” and “clowning” has changed. Recent information about “creepy” and “scary” clowns is presented in Chapter 25 on sociology.

4. Knowing that people have individualized senses of humor, and that what makes one person laugh might annoy or insult someone else, means that we should not expect mass-produced humor programs to work for everyone. We recently interviewed a man who was earning a graduate degree in psychology and counseling in hopes of successfully putting his “true love” of clowning to work in hospitals. As he explained to us, it is going to be “way different from circus clowning” because he is not going to be “performing” as much as he will be “relating” to people one-on-one. In light of this, he says that he will need to be aware of each person’s medical history and will need to take time to get acquainted with them before he starts “being funny.”

The individuality of humor as it relates to stress was illustrated for us by what one of our students wrote about a casual observation she had made. When students were absent from one of our humor classes, we would let them make up an absence by observing something “humorous” and then writing up their observations and telling us what they learned from the experience. Here is what a female student turned into us during final exam week:

Two nights ago I was walking back to my dorm from the library and witnessed a male student sitting in the Sandra Day O'Connor Law School library smacking his head with a textbook multiple times. It was apparent that he was not doing this to amuse someone else because he was alone. It was finals week, so he must have been extremely stressed out, but it was absolutely hilarious to me, and since he had no idea that anybody was witnessing his behavior, it was even funnier. As soon as I was past the windows of the library I laughed out loud for a good five minutes. Since I was also stressed out from studying for finals, the incident relieved my own stress, and I developed a new appreciation of how humor can be used as a coping mechanism, and encouragement not to magnify the small stuff. Witnessing how ridiculous that student looked in the law library, made me more relaxed about my own finals. I knew I had studied and that's what matters. The student I secretly watched was taking school way too seriously.

We were sorry that she turned this into us on the last day of class because it would have been interesting to share it with the class to see what they thought about the frustration that this law student was obviously feeling. The same day that she turned this in, we teachers in the Honors College were surprised to see

several beautifully groomed dogs and their owners walking around the Honors College campus. Most students just glanced at the dogs and walked on, but a few students were kneeling down and petting a dog while they chatted with the owner. One of our students saw the look of puzzlement on our faces and explained that these were “comfort dogs” brought to our campus by members of a club who were hoping to help students relax as they studied for their exams.

We had to work hard to push out of our minds the idea that today’s students are hopelessly spoiled, but now, in retrospect, we like the idea because it had all of these advantages:

- Relating to one or more of the dogs was purely voluntary.
- It was a much more efficient way to relax than taking time out to see a funny movie or watch a late-night comedy show, or go to a bar or a club to try and “forget their troubles.”
- There was no social pressure and students had time to think about the matter. Some students walked hurriedly on, then turned around and came back as they realized what was happening.
- The dogs’ owners were right there, so the students had a human face to look into and relate to, which gave them confidence that the dog wasn’t going to bite them.
- The experience also gave the students something light-hearted to think and to talk about – it was a pleasant and an efficient break from worrying about their exams.

In conclusion, we feel that laughter, smiling and humor are indeed beneficial, but also we want to sum up some of our warnings:

1. People have individualized senses of humor. What makes one person laugh might annoy or insult someone else.
2. Even if it’s true that people with a good sense of humor live longer, it might be that people who are healthy and successful have more reason to be cheerful.
3. Pleasant patients may receive better health care than do grumpy and hostile patients.
4. While hearty laughter pumps adrenalin and other powerful chemicals into people’s bloodstreams, other things have similar effects on health and healing, such as visits from pets, family members, close friends, or the clergy.
5. If laughter enhances the immune system, then what about implant patients? Might a stronger immune system cause them to reject their implants.

In spite of these “warnings,” at the least, we will go along with the observer who compared using humor to changing a baby’s diaper. It might not permanently solve any problems, but at least it makes the situation more acceptable for a while.

### Points of Departure

1. When Don was teaching a linguistics lesson about body-part metaphors, he would have his entire class stand up and go through the actions as they sang the children's song, "Head, shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes. Head, shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes. Eyes and ears and mouth and nose ..." Explain why these particular body parts (especially faces) are such important concepts that they inspire metaphors. Explain the original meaning and the metaphorical meaning in the italicized words in these sample sentences.
  - We need a *head* of lettuce if we're having sandwiches.
  - In heavy snow, it's hard to know just where the *shoulder* of the road is.
  - My cousin says her 2-year-old is only *knee*-high to a grasshopper.
  - It's easier to *toe* the line physically than emotionally.
  - It can be scary to be caught in the *eye* of a tornado.
  - How many *ears* of corn are you bringing ?
  - The *mouth* of a river is usually where it flows into a lake or the ocean.
  - The *nose* cone on a rocket ship is likely to get scratched or dented.
2. Now see if you can make sentences similar to the ones above but using the body-part metaphors listed below. Maybe you can work in small groups and then read and explain your sentences to the class.
3. In late summer of 1998, ABC (the American Broadcasting Company)

foot	face	hair	teeth	tongue
elbow	butt	corpus	neck	hand
fingers	arm	heart	chest	kidney

sent out postcards reading, "Laughter is the best medicine ... Unless you're really sick ... Then you should call 911." What do you think the purpose of the cards was? Was it a public service? Or was it just a light-hearted way for ABC to remind people that their broadcasting company was interested in the general welfare of Americans?

Humor can be a part of virtually any kind of music. Mothers amuse their babies by singing funny nursery rhymes and playing musical games. Kindergarteners, who can't say their ABCs, can sing them, along with songs from *Sesame Street*, and humorous advertising jingles. Middle-grade children sing funny songs when they go off to summer camp; teenagers revel in the dark humor that sometimes finds its way into rock music and videos; and the general population enjoys the regional humor of country and western music, the character development in musical comedies, and the wit that finds its way into operas and classical music.

### Emotional Effects of Music

At the same time that music increases people's emotional reactions, it decreases the intensity of their intellectual reactions by inspiring a willing suspension of disbelief. For example, with both musical comedies and videos made for MTV, audiences don't think to question the coincidence of a band or an orchestra waiting just off-stage or off-screen, ready to accompany whoever suddenly feels inspired to break into a heartfelt song expressing their emotions. This is true not only for contemporary hip-hop and rap, but also for such counter-culture rock musicals as Jerome Ragni and James Rado's *Hair*, and *Beatlemania*, based on the music of John Lennon and Paul McCartney. The same is true of Warren Casey's *Grease*. An air of the forbidden also circles around such musicals as *Cabaret*, *Hellzapoppin'*, and *Oh, Calcutta!*

About two-thirds of the Broadway shows that have had runs of over 1,200 performances have been musicals. They include such comedies of manners as *Cats*, based on T. S. Eliot's witty personifications of humans in cat fur; *Oklahoma*, where the big-city dudes in Kansas City have "gone about as far as they can go"; *La Cage Aux Folles* with its confusion of cross-dressed characters and sexual innuendo; and *Funny Girl*, the true story of comedian Fanny Brice and her gambler husband, Nick Arnstein.

Musical comedies are mostly exaggerations with people and events bigger than life, and regular rules of time, space, and expectations of normality

violated. Few theater-goers know people as dynamic as Auntie Mame in Jerry Herman's *Mame*, Dolly in Herman's *Hello Dolly*, and Annie Oakley in Irving Berlin's *Annie Get Your Gun*. When characters are this exaggerated and charismatic, trivial events and random activities have rich comic possibilities. Many comic heroes are outcasts who do not play by the rules. Audiences nevertheless identify with these high-spirited "underdogs" as they engage in guerrilla warfare against society.

Musicals of this type usually end in compromise. Roguish characters are brought a bit closer to society's ways of thinking but society is also brought a bit closer to the rogue. For example, in Meredith Wilson's *The Music Man*, Professor Hill is a charlatan who can't read a note of music. Yet he convinces the townspeople of River City, Iowa, that they need a brass band. As he transforms a dull town into a singing and dancing community, he too is transformed into a good citizen with the help of "Marian, the Librarian." In Abe Burrows and Frank Loesser's *Guys and Dolls*, Nathan Detroit, an inveterate gambler, is involved in all kinds of shady dealings, including making bets about Sarah Brown, the woman who runs the street-corner mission, yet audiences cheer for the "good man" hidden inside the gambler. In Carol Hall's *Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*, the madam has to close down her lively, "almost wholesome" establishment, but as a consolation prize, she gets to elope with the sheriff.

### Musical Theater

Musical theater goes back at least to the thirteenth century where there are records of a musical telling of the story of Robin Hood and Maid Marion. By the 1500s, such theater had been influenced by the *commedia dell'arte* and by farcical *Punch and Judy* puppet shows so that it leaned heavily toward slapstick comedy. In the 1600s, the Italians developed their *Opera Buffa*, leading the way to comic opera, which in France became the *Comédie Française* and in Germany the *Komische Oper*. Musicologist Karl Haas says that in England *Komische Oper* led to John Gay and John Christopher Pepusch's 1728 *The Beggar's Opera*, in the 1850s and 1860s to Offenbach's satirical masterpieces, and in the 1870s through the 1890s to the work of Britishers W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan.

In *Better Foot Forward: The History of American Musical Theatre*, Ethan C. Mordden says that in the 1920s Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein "led the revolution from empty-headed musical comedy to adult musical theater." Before they started working together, musical comedy was "a hap-hazard melding of stars, tunes, and jokes, made for fun but not form." Kern and Hammerstein turned the corner with *Show Boat* (1927), based on Edna Ferber's novel about life among Mississippi River entertainers. Telling the stories of musicians, dancers, actors, and writers is popular because it provides a natural vehicle for

singing, dancing, and other skills. When, in the 1940s, Hammerstein teamed up with Richard Rodgers, Americans were ready for a new level of sophistication in music, staging, subject matter, and humor. In a 1998 tribute piece to their partnership in *TIME* magazine (June 8, 1998), Andrew Lloyd Webber said that Rodgers and Hammerstein were the first to truly blend music, action, and words. Nearly forty years after Hammerstein died from cancer in 1960, their partnership “has not yet been equaled. It probably never will be.”

Many humorous performers were trained in music before they turned to comedy. The music training helped develop their abilities to gauge audience reactions, and also helped with their timing. Phil Silvers and Woody Allen played the clarinet. Johnny Carson and Charlie Callus were drummers, and Danny Kaye and Jerry Lewis were conductors. Sid Caesar made his living as a concert saxophonist before turning to comedy, while Morey Amsterdam played the cello. Henny Youngman played the violin, and Bob Hope was a singer. Chevy Chase was a drummer and a keyboardist for the Chamaeleon Church.

Phyllis Diller was trained at the Sherwood Music School in Chicago, where she played concert piano and harpsichord, and early in her career, she sang parodies. Under the name of Dame Illya Dillya, she has appeared as a piano soloist with 100 different symphony orchestras, playing serious music including Bach and Beethoven. She relates her music training to her career in comedy as follows: “Comedy is listening – the ear, rhythm, and timing.” She says that “Every word is timed and choreographed, and the joke word is the last word in the payoff. The last word preferably should end in an explosive consonant.” Her example was, “He bought a zebra and named it *Spot!*” Diller chose her signature prop of a cigarette in a long holder merely to portray a certain type of woman, but found that she felt comfortable and natural in using it, much like the conductor of an orchestra uses a baton, signaling for attention, punctuating the end of a joke, pointing at someone, expressing hostility, and in general, controlling the audience.

Goldie Hawn had formal dance training in which she learned the importance of timing to build for comic effect. Even though Jack Benny usually used his violin as a comedy prop, he was in fact an accomplished violinist, and appeared as a soloist with many different major symphony orchestras. He admitted, however, that the orchestras had to slow down the tempo a little, so that he could keep up.

Judy Canova’s character was a hillbilly, but Canova was a great singer, with a voice range of three octaves. She sang spoofs of country and western songs, with a little bit of yodeling thrown in for good measure. She wore long pigtailed, a straw hat, and checkered country clothes. She carried a battered suitcase and played the role of a man-chasing hillbilly. Because she was so country, she could express a kind of crass sexuality that would have been forbidden to more “ladylike” performers.

From the mid-1940s through the mid-1960s, Spike Jones and his City Slickers played classical music, opera, and Tin Pan Alley hits using cowbells, horns, pistols, pans, pots, saws, tire pumps, washboards, and whistles. Their fame came in 1942 with “Der Fuehrer’s Face,” which was filled with Bronx cheers, also called raspberries. The group also had zany renditions of “Cocktails for Two,” and “Chlo-e.” As leader, Jones wore loud plaid suits, laconically chewed gum, and used a gun in place of a baton. He occasionally pulled the trigger to add to the musical chaos. Clarinetist Mickey Katz provided vocal “glugs” and other funny throat sounds. In 1994, Thomas Pynchon, a long-time fan, wrote a 3,000-word booklet to accompany a newly compiled CD of the band’s hits.

Ernie Kovacs invented “The Nairobi Trio,” three people in gorilla outfits wearing bowler hats. They moved like clock figures to a tune played on a tin whistle. Suddenly the drummer, with no change of expression, would use his drumsticks to pummel the head of the gorilla in front of him, and then they would all go back into the clockwork routine.

### Novelty Songs on the Radio

Comedians who moved from vaudeville to radio had an advantage if they could sing, because on radio, where listeners were deprived of seeing the performers, it was important to have different voices making different sounds. As a radio and stand-up performer, George Burns would sing his old vaudeville songs with the words crunched together. This is similar to the gimmick that Ish Kabibble (Merwyn Bogue) used in his 1940s hit “Mairzy Doats,” i.e. “Mares eat oats.” The lines to this intriguing song were sung very fast so that the sounds were assimilated together and the result was pure gibberish. Another novelty song for adults during the 1940s was “Dit, Dat, Ditem, Dattem, Wattem, Chew.” Here are the lyrics as we heard them, but we’ve also been told about other versions:

Dit, Dat, Ditem, Dattem, Wattem, Chew  
 Swam three little fishes, and a Momma fishy too.  
 “Swim” said the Momma and they swam and they swam,  
 And they swam and they swam all over the dam!

This is repeated over and over until the parents finally say, “‘Nuf o’ that.”

Another anonymous novelty song sung during the 1940s was “Swinging on a Star?” The lyrics go as follows:

Would you like to swing on a star  
 Carry moonbeams home in a jar  
 And be better off than you are  
 Or would you rather be a mule?



A mule is an animal with long, funny ears  
 He kicks up at anything he hears.  
 His back is brawny, but his brain is weak.  
 He's just plain stupid with a stubborn streak.  
 And by the way, if you hate to go to school  
 You may grow up to be a mule.

The song goes on to ask if you would rather be a pig, “an animal with dirt on his face / Its feet are a terrible disgrace.” Or would you rather be a fish? “A fish won't do anything but swim in a brook / He can't write his name, or read a book.”

### Action Songs

Parents of small children love singing “Eensy weensy spider went up the water spout” or “Head, shoulders, knees, and toes” to their smiling and laughing children. For older children, there are many humorous jump-rope songs, and still later in the military there are call-and-response chants between the drill sergeants and the troops, used for keeping soldiers in step, like:

Mary was there when you left.  
 Right.  
 Polly was there when you left.  
 Right  
 Suzy was there when you left.  
 Right.  
 Sound off.  
 One, two.  
 Sound off.  
 Three, four.  
 Cadence Count.  
 One, two, three, four, one two ... three-four.

Jimmy Durante, who began his career as a nightclub pianist, also sang novelty numbers, but admitted that he never had “much of a voice.” He nevertheless became famous for singing “Inka Dinka Do,” a piece he composed himself: “Say it with flowers, say it with drink / But always be careful not to say it with Ink ... ka dinka do ....” Carol Burnett liked to include a “singing spot” on her network television shows where she featured such musically accomplished co-stars as Julie Andrews, Beverly Sills, Dolly Parton, and Placido Domingo. Burnett explains that her love of music goes back to her childhood, when her mother would sit in the kitchen and play her ukulele while Carol sang. She had a wonderful ear for music and taught her daughter all kinds of old songs. While Carol sang, her mother did the harmony.

## Satire and Parody

Tom Lehrer was a Harvard professor who took time off from teaching between 1953 and 1965 to make recordings of about forty songs of musical parody and political satire. Even though he hasn't recorded a new song for more than forty-five years, his parody and satire songs are still widely available on the web. Lehrer ponders why putting verbal wit and music together is so effective. In 1991, Lehrer said, "Clearly, it has something to do with expectancy. A well-known tune sets up a challenge. There's a template. The trick is to avoid what the listener has provisionally guessed. You have to satisfy the task, but avoid predictability. That's how it's creative, the surprise." Among Lehrer's musical surprises were songs about poisoning pigeons in the park, hometown perverts, and charred bodies in a nuclear holocaust. One of his most famous (and most shocking) songs is "The Vatican Rag" with its "Bow your head with great respect and – Genuflect! Genuflect! Genuflect!"

Among the younger parodists is Weird Al Yankovic and his wild, curly hair, loud Hawaiian shirts, and what *TV Guide* described as "the worst mustache in show business." Yankovic turned Michael Jackson's "Beat It" into "Eat it," and the Knacks' "My Sharona" into "My Bologna." His "I Lost on Jeopardy" makes fun of both the television quiz show and Greg Kihn's "Our Love's in Jeopardy."

Humor in classical music has a long tradition as shown by such playful genres as the French "gavotte," which, like the Irish and English gigue or jig, is music for a fast-moving dance. A "scherzo" is a musical joke, while a "capriccio" is a composition that is irregular in form and usually lively and whimsical. The Latin word for she-goat is "capra" and can be seen in such expressions as "the Isle of Capri" and "Capricorn (horn of a goat)." A "divertimento" is a light and entertaining instrumental composition – a diversion. And a "rondo" is a composition whose principal theme is repeated three or more times in the same key, interspersed with subordinate themes.

## Historical Musical Humor

In the 1700s and 1800s, German composers like Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750), George Frederick Handel (1685–1759), Franz Joseph Haydn (1732–1809), Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791), Ludvig van Beethoven (1770–1827), Richard Wagner (1813–1883), and Johann Strauss II (1825–1899) all had wonderful senses of humor. Johann Pachelbel (1653–1706) was not known for his sense of humor, but his Canon in D has been expertly parodied and satirized in Rob Paravonian's "Pachelbel Rant." Rob now plays the guitar, but when he played the cello the piece that he hated the most was Pachelbel's Canon in D. He says that when playing this piece, the cello section

has only eight quarter notes, repeated fifty-four times. The notes are D, A, B, F#, G, D, G, and A. Rob laments that the violins, the violas, and even the second violins have great melodies in Pachelbel's Canon in D, but the cello part goes on and on with the same eight notes. But in trying to flee from Pachelbel's Canon in D, Rob discovered that these eight musical notes seem to be in all music, ranging from classic rock to folk music, and even punk rock.

Johann Sebastian Bach lived from 1685 to 1750. In his Pulitzer-Prize-winning *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, Douglas Hofstadter compares Bach's fascination with acoustic loops to artist M. C. Escher's fascination with visual loops in which a waterfall appears to become its own source. In his "Endlessly Rising Canon," Bach seems to be drawing to a conclusion, but instead slips out of the key of C minor and into D minor. This false "ending" ties smoothly into a new beginning where Bach repeats the process and returns to the key of E, only to start over again. Hofstadter says that "these successive modulations lead the ear to increasingly remote provinces on tonality, so that after several of them, one would expect to be hopelessly far away from the starting key. And yet, magically, after exactly six such modulations, the original key of C minor has been restored."

One of the most famous pieces in all of classical music is the Hallelujah Chorus from George Frederick Handel's *The Messiah*. There was a tradition at the University of Michigan, and a number of other places, where the entire audience brings copies of the Hallelujah Chorus with them to performances of *The Messiah*. At the point where the choir is getting ready to sing the Hallelujah Chorus, the conductor turns around and conducts the entire audience. The musical effect is sublime. One of the best parodies of the Hallelujah Chorus is done by an order of parody-monks which has taken a vow of silence. These monks have the words of the piece written in large letters on cardboard, and rather than singing the words, they hold up their cardboard signs as each word comes along.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart wrote *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, which contains much dramatic irony as the characters become the victims of tricksters and suffer from misidentifications and misunderstood events. Mozart was a contemporary of Haydn, and Haydn's *The Village Musicians* is also known as *A Musical Joke*. This is because he composed it as a grand burlesque of the nonprofessional playing that was done by amateur community bands of his day. Another example of Mozart's sense of humor occurs in *The Magic Flute*, where there is a wonderful duet between Papagena and Papageno with many popping sounds. Ludwig van Beethoven satirized local musicians in his "Pastoral Symphony" where he portrayed a sleepy village in which the musicians doze off, wake up, play a few notes, and then doze off again.

Even in the most serious operas, composers include light moments for comic relief. For example, in his *Ring Cycle*, Richard Wagner has the young Siegfried

turn the brown bear loose on Mime so that he and the audience can relish the dwarf's fright. And one of the funniest lines in all of opera is the dramatic irony when Siegfried slices open Brünnhilde's breastplate with his armor-piercing sword, and exclaims, "Das ist kein Mann!" (This is not a man!)

### Personal Tastes in Music

In 1954 and 1955 when Don was a soldier in Kaiserslautern, Germany, he had the nickname of "Fledermaus." This is because he was the only soldier on the Rhine-Ordinance-Barracks military base who enjoyed going to German operas, and one of the operas he liked best was *Die Fledermaus* (composed by Johann Strauss II).

Austria's Franz Joseph Haydn had a wonderful sense of musical humor. When Haydn became distressed by the number of people who fell asleep while listening to his chamber music, he wrote Symphony Number 94 ("The Surprise Symphony") in the key of G, using a slow tempo and soft and repetitive sequences. At the end of each stanza, he modulates the music to the key of G and ends with a resounding fortissimo chord, guaranteed to wake up anyone who might be dozing. Haydn's String Quartet Opus 33, Number 2 is called "The Joke." This is because it has so many false endings. This piece seems to conclude, but then it continues on until it seems to end again, but not really, until ...

The *Farewell Symphony* is another example of Haydn's humor. He wanted to communicate that the musicians were lonely for their wives and needed to go home for the summer. So, as the symphony draws to its end, various musicians turn off the lights on their music stands and depart. Audiences are amused at the gradual diminishing of the orchestra, one section at a time, but the audiences during Haydn's time understood his message. It's noteworthy that this same technique was later used in *The Sound of Music* as each member of the von Trapp family left the stage and was smuggled out of the theater past the Nazi guards.

A composer in Italy who had a sense of humor was Gioachino Rossini (1792–1868), who wrote *The Barber of Seville*, which contains much dramatic irony as the Lord of the Manor attempts to seduce the Barber's bride-to-be and the Barber and his bride-to-be use their wit and creativity to thwart his attempts. There is also humor in the flourishes and strikes in Rossini's *The Thieving Magpie*.

In our opinion the French composer with the best sense of humor is Camille Saint-Saëns (1835–1921). He composed *Danse Macabre* using the "Devil's Interval" (between the fourth and the fifth on the musical scale, a tritone). This is a devilishly hard interval to maintain because the musician playing it wants to go up to the fourth (adding a flat) or up to the fifth (adding a sharp) from

the basic key. In *The Carnival of the Animals*, Saint-Saëns wrote musical parodies of a Royal March of lions, plus hens and roosters, wild asses, tortoises, elephants, kangaroos, fish, donkeys, cuckoos, birds, pianists, fossils, and swans. Ogden Nash added lyrics for each of Saint-Saëns' animals. Saint-Saëns' music for "tortoises" was slow and plodding, and was actually a parody, a very slow version of the *Galop Infernal* in Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underworld*, which was written for the fast and playful French *Can-can* dance.

### Humorous Composers

There are many nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian composers who also had a sense of humor. Examples include Antonin Dvořák (1841–1904), Sergei Prokofiev (1891–1953) and Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893). Antonin Dvořák's "New World" Symphony gives us insights into the feelings and impressions Dvořák had when he visited America. Sergei Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf* is famous for its leitmotifs which radically change the tone of the music as each character enters the stage. In your mind, think of Prokofiev's music that is associated with Peter, the wolf, the bird, the grandfather, etc. Musicians have an advantage in creating humor because music has the power to increase the intensity of people's emotions. Music establishes mood and tone; for example, in *Peter and the Wolf*, when the narrator is talking about Peter, the music is light and playful, but when he starts talking about the wolf, the tone becomes dark and threatening.

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky was famous for such ballets as *The Nutcracker* and *Swan Lake*. In *The Nutcracker*, all of the Christmas treats (including the Sugar Plum Fairies) come to life and dance their various appropriately scored dances. In *Swan Lake*, there is the clash of musical and ballet styles as the same dancer dances the beautiful and lyrical White Swan, and then dances the darker, more angular Black Swan. Canada's Ballet Trocadero is an all-male ballet troupe that parodies the all-female dances in the *Swan Lake Ballet*. If you are a male, try dancing on your toes. It's not an easy thing to do. In his *1812 Overture*, Tchaikovsky wrote "cannons" into his musical score.

One of England's most important contributions to the field of humorous music is the team of Gilbert and Sullivan. From the 1870s to the 1890s, W. S. Gilbert and Sir Arthur Sullivan wrote many comic operas, including *The Gondoliers*, *H. M. S. Pinafore*, *Iolanthe*, *The Mikado*, *Patience*, *The Pirates of Penzance*, *Prince Ida*, *Ruddigore*, *The Sorcerer*, *Trial by Jury*, and *The Yeoman of the Guard*. The wordplay and music-play in all of these Gilbert and Sullivan operas are outstanding. The *Mikado* himself has many exaggerated titles, responsibilities, and honorific names. Other names in this opera include Nanki-Poo, Ko-Ko, Pooh-Bah, Pish-Tush, Go-To, Yum-Yum, Piti-Sing, and Peep Bo. And most of the action takes place in the fictional Japanese town of Titipu.

America has also made many important contributions to the field of humorous music, as can be seen in the performances of Scott Joplin (1867–1917), Chico Marx (1887–1961), Harpo Marx (1888–1964), Ferde Grofé (1892–1972), Leroy Anderson (1908–1975), Victor Borge (1909–2000), Tom Lehrer (1928–), Mark Russell (1932–) and Peter Schickele (1935–). Scott Joplin was famous for his syncopated rhythms and playful style. One of Scott Joplin's pieces that went viral on YouTube was his *Peacherine Rag* played on recycled bottles.

Political satirist Mark Russell began writing and singing song parodies in the early 1960s at the Shoreham-American Hotel in Washington, DC, where politicians, patrons, and columnists started dropping by for drinks and the lively piano player's take on the latest news. Russell's formula is to take a popular tune and give it new words. He would have such song lyrics as "Pardon me, boys / Are you the cats who shot Ceauescu? / You made my day / The way you blew him away." During the 1980s and 1990s, Mark Russell used his musical abilities to become a well-known political commentator – talking and playing the piano, first in nightclub settings and then in performance halls. During Reagan's presidency, he took the tune of "My Bonnie Lies over the Ocean" and changed it to:

My ship of state's practically grounded  
For want of a policy plan.  
I deny all the charges – unfounded –  
Since the state of my ship hit the fan.

And then it continues, "Bring back. Bring back. Oh bring back my Teflon to me, to me ..."

"The Capitol Steps" is a musical group that began in 1981. They have satirized the presidencies of Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama. The group have released more than forty albums, and usually perform in the Washington DC area, lampooning both Republicans and Democrats. During the Obama administration, they released the following albums: *Mock the Vote*, *How to Succeed in Congress without Really Lying*, *Fiscal Shades of Gray*, *Take the Money and Run for President*, *Desperate House Members*, *Liberal Shop of Horrors*, and *Obama Mia*.

In the early and mid-1900s, when Chico Marx played an arpeggio on the piano, he would play all of the notes but one. And then he would point to that key with his index finger, and using his thumb as a "trigger" he would "shoot the key." Harpo Marx would also "shoot the keys," but he was also famous for playing glissandos (sliding scales), and for getting his finger stuck between the keys. We old-timers thought about Chico and his "shooting of the keys" when we saw Mr. Bean playing his one-note solo as part of Britain's opening ceremonies for the 2012 Olympics.

Ferde Grofé was an American composer of iconic music. Such music is humorous because the iconicity is quite unexpected. In the “On the Trail” section of his *Grand Canyon Suite*, Grofé scored it so that members of the percussion section played the sound of the donkeys descending into the Grand Canyon – dump dadump dadump dadadada, dump dadump dadump dadadada, and then the sound of the braying donkeys was played by muted trumpets. In a similar way, Leroy Anderson wrote parts for typewriters and sleigh bells into his musical compositions.

Victor Borge’s *Comedy in Music* show on Broadway was a one-man show that ran for 894 performances over three years. Victor Borge was a Danish-born American humorist, sometimes referred to as “The Great Dane.” Early in his career, when he was performing a piano concerto, the conductor lost his place in the musical score. Borge, a talented and serious player, stood up from his piano bench, walked over to the conductor’s stand, pointed to the right place in the score, and then returned to his piano bench to finish the concerto. The strength of the applause was a turning point in Borge’s career. One of Borge’s most popular gags was to look befuddled as he examined a musical score and tried to play it. After some false starts and pondering, he would realize that it was upside-down, so he would turn it over and play the piece masterfully. While he is doing one of his musical parody performances, Borge often shifts slyly from a piece of classical music into a piece of popular music. He also played pop culture pieces like “Happy Birthday to You” as if it had been composed by Bach or Brahms. Borge also loved wordplay. He said that a particular piece he was playing by Rachmaninov was written in four flats – because the composer had been so poor he had to keep moving while he was working on it. About another piece that he is playing, Borge announced that it had been composed by Bach, but he couldn’t remember whether it was Johann Sebastian or Jacques Offen.

Much of the musical theater on Broadway is humorous. The original *Rocky Horror Picture Show* was launched in 1975 in Los Angeles, California, but it wasn’t really successful. In 1976 it was relaunched as a midnight movie beginning at the Waverly Theater in New York, and because of the melodramatic exaggerations of the characters, vulgar sex jokes, puns, and pop cultural references, it became a cult classic. The fan base was huge, and by the end of 1979, there were twice-weekly showings in more than 230 American theaters. The fans came dressed as characters in the film, and brought with them toast, water pistols, umbrellas, hot dogs, rice, and toilet paper to use at the appropriate points in the movie, as when it rained (water pistols and umbrellas), when there was a wedding (the audience threw rice) and when a character broke through a wall and shouted “Great Scott” (they threw Scott toilet paper). We were wondering if these events are still going on, so we searched “The Rocky Horror Picture Show,” and discovered that the Michigan Rocky Horror Preservation Society would be having four showings in the ensuing two months. We assume



that Michigan is typical of many American states in still having interactive showings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

Later American musical parodies include *Little Shop of Horrors* (1982–), a very dark musical comedy about a worker in a florist shop who raises a plant that feeds on human flesh and blood, and *The Book of Mormon* (2011–), a musical comedy about two Mormon missionaries who go to Africa to “preach the gospel.” The cultural clashes that occur between the Mormon missionaries and their African “investigators” are insightful and funny in both directions. Another example of musical parody is Monty Python’s *Spamalot*, which premiered December 21, 2004 at the Shubert Theatre in Chicago. It is an irreverent musical comedy adapted from the 1975 film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Mike Nichols was the director for the long-running show which was nominated for fourteen different Tony Awards and in its initial run of over 1,500 performances was seen by more than two million people.

Peter Schickele had a weekly radio program called “Schickeley Mix,” in which he introduced a character by the name of P. D. Q. Bach. P. D. Q. Bach said that he was the last of Johann Sebastian Bach’s twenty-odd children. Schickele published a newsletter named *The Schickele Rag*, which gave information about the activities of Peter Schickele and P. D. Q. Bach, along with music (usually rondos), crossword puzzles, miscellaneous articles, atrocious puns, and assorted hype. P. D. Q. Bach wrote such music as “Sonata for Viola, Four Hands, and Harpsichord,” which was considered to be the only extant piece of music written to be played by two musicians on the same viola. Schickele kept unearthing various P. D. Q. Bach “schleptetas” and “pervertimentos.” Schickele reasoned that P. D. Q. had a wider appeal than other classical musicians because whenever someone heard the music of Mozart or Beethoven, it was so perfect that it gave everyone an inferiority complex, whereas, when a person heard something by P. D. Q. Bach, that person felt capable of writing something “as good or better.” Peter Schickele was the first person to occupy the General Electric Chair at the University of Southern North Dakota at Huppel. Between 1990 and 1993 Schickeley won four consecutive Grammy Awards for Best Comedy Album.

### Points of Departure

First, see if you can *sing* each of the following advertising jingles. Second, analyze each of the jingles according to the following criteria: 1. Creativity, 2. Humor, 3. Effectiveness as an advertisement:

Oh I'd love to be an *Oscar Meyer Wiener*.  
That is what I really want to be,  
Cause if I were an *Oscar Meyer Wiener*,  
Then everyone would be in love with me.

Call *Roto Rooter*, that's the name  
And away goes trouble, down the drain.

I'm a Pepper; you're a Pepper; she's a Pepper;  
Wouldn't you like to be a Pepper too?

Meow Meow Meow Meow  
Meow Meow Meow Meow  
Meow Meow Meow Meow Meow Meow Meow Meow  
Meow Meow Meow Meow Meow Meow Meow Meow  
Meow Meow Meow Meow Meow Meow Meow Meow  
Meow Meow Meow Meow Meow  
*Meow Mix*: Cats ask for it by name.

Mmm Mmm Good, Mmm Mmm Good.  
That's what *Campbell's Soups* are,  
Mmm Mmm Good.

I'd like to teach the world to sing, In perfect harmony,  
I'd like to buy the world a Coke, And keep it company.  
It's the real thing. *Coca Cola* is Coke.

Double your pleasure. Double your fun,  
With double good, double good,  
*Doublemint* gum.

Like a good neighbor,  
*State Farm* is there.

When you say *Budweiser*,  
You've said it all.

We all know that an important function of language is to name persons, places, and things. When we want to talk about something as a class or a group, we use “common nouns” to refer to common things. And when we want to talk about specific or unique things, we use “proper nouns” or “names,” which we capitalize as a sign that we are referring to a specific person, place, or thing. Early in history – or maybe we should say pre-history – one name was enough for individuals, because most people lived in small groups, but as civilizations changed and people began living in bigger groups, it became the custom to also give people a *surname* (an additional name) so as to distinguish them from other people with the same name, while also showing their relationship to other members of “the tribe.” This surname could have been a description as in *Longfellow*, *Brown*, *White*, or *Truman*. Or it could have identified the place of the family home as in *Hill*, *Atwater*, *North*, *Churchill*, *Eastwood*, *Mondale*, or *Sutherland*. It might have come from an occupation as in *Baker*, *Taylor*, *Fletcher*, *Thatcher*, *Arrowsmith*, *Coppersmith*, *Wainwright*, *Sawyer*, or *Cantor*; or it might have identified a family relationship as in *MacDonald*, *O’Donald*, *Fitzpatrick*, *Colovitch*, *Bin Laden*, *Ebnascena*, or *Bowen*. Names in this category are called “patronyms” because the names were usually passed down from father (or sometimes from mother) to son or daughter.

It used to be one of those little thrills in life to find someone who happened to have both your given and your family names, but now, of course with the Internet, it is much easier to find what some people call a googleganger. In the United States there are so many people named *Jim Smith* that several years ago they formed an organization. When they met for conventions, of course the hotel manager was glad to have all the rooms filled, but the workers in the business office weren’t so happy because they had to work overtime to be sure they got the right bill to the right customer.

How closely people identify with their own names was illustrated after the 2016 Olympics by gymnast Simone Biles, who was irritated at the sports writers who began referring to her with the names of previous gold medal winners. She responded by declaring, “I’m not the next Usain Bolt or Michael Phelps. I’m the first Simone Biles.” (*TIME* magazine August 29, 2016).

## Humorous Lexicalization and Eponyms

“Lexicalization” is the name of the process that takes place when a word that started out as a name (either the name of a person or a place) turns into a word in the language with its own meaning. The new word may, or may not, acknowledge the history of the name. If it is coming from a person or a place that is famous, then both meanings will probably be connected to the word, but if the word comes from someone’s name who is not quite as famous, or who lived a long time ago, then people who use the word will not be as likely to connect it to the individual.

When names become lexicalized they serve a function diametrically opposed to their original purpose. As proper nouns, personal names refer uniquely to one person and the life of that person, while common nouns refer more broadly and take on lives of their own. Luck is involved in whose name becomes an eponym as well as in what feature(s) will be stressed. While most eponyms are based on the names of people in the public eye, a surprising number of them are taken from names that just “happen to fit,” and as time goes by the origin of the word will be forgotten. A good example is the word *sideburns* as the name for the hair-style in which a man lets his hair and beard grow down over the sides of his face. It is so self-explanatory that most people use the word without giving a thought to General Ambrose Burnside. He became famous during the American Civil War in the 1860s, but probably the only people who know this detail are the ones who have read or heard that the General was so famous that people adopted his name and reversed it to describe the style of his hair and whiskers. In a process that is reminiscent of the Biblical line, “To he who has, shall be given,” the honor of an eponym usually goes to whoever in an endeavor has the most prestige. These examples are not laugh-out-loud funny, but they are amusing.

- Surely, Osman I, who in 1603 founded the Ottoman Empire which lasted for over 600 years, never dreamed that the main use of his name in English would be to designate an *ottoman*, which is a large, overstuffed footstool (or couch without a back).
- Nor did Mary Magdalene, the reformed prostitute from the New Testament, dream that her name would go down in history as *maudlin* to mean “exaggerated or overly sentimental sorrow.” This meaning of her name was the result of the sad expression that artists customarily put on her face when they included her in one of their paintings.
- The British doctor, Joseph Lister (1827–1912), developed the concept and the methodology of antiseptic surgery. He wanted to be remembered as the founder of the Lister Institute of Preventative Medicine. Instead, his name is most often spoken when people talk about *Listerine* mouthwash, a commercial product, although he tried unsuccessfully to prevent the manufacturer from using his name.

### Four Processes of Language Change

Here are four little stories about people whose names became fairly common eponyms.

**Specialization** occurs when over time the word is used for an increasingly smaller set of referents, which is what happened to the word *tarmac*. In the early 1800s, Scottish road surveyor John McAdam devised a method of building roads in which large, tightly packed chunks of stone are placed on convex, well-drained surfaces and then covered with crushed layers of smaller stones. Such roads were described as *Macadam* or *Macadamized*. In the early 1900s, an improvement to the process was made through mixing tar and bitumen with the last layer of small stones. These roads were described as *tarmacadam*, later shortened to *tarmac*, first as a commercial name and then as a general word. But since Americans had already found it easier to talk about paved or black-topped roads, *tarmac* was not needed in this context and so it slipped over to fill a specialized need, i.e. for the paved runways at airports.

**Generalization** occurs when a word is used for an increasingly larger set of referents. In the fourth century AD, Saint Nicholas of Lycia became the patron saint of Russia. He was also the patron saint of mariners, thieves, virgins, and children. One story says that he saved three maidens without dowries from lives of prostitution by throwing purses of gold through their windows on three successive evenings. This is the origin of stories and songs about “Jolly Old St. Nicholas” and the idea that he will leave Christmas gifts for good boys and girls. His name was said so often that *Saint Nicholas* gradually evolved into *Santa Claus*. Over sixteen centuries, the term has come full circle from referring to Saint Nicholas, a particular individual, to referring to Santa Claus, also a particular individual, but one who has been generalized in a unique way. What child hasn’t questioned how Santa Claus can get to everyone’s house on the same night and why they can pass a Santa Claus standing on the corner and ringing a bell asking for donations while they are on their way to visit Santa Claus at a shopping mall.

**Amelioration** happens when a word takes on a more positive meaning. The connotations of eponyms seldom improve, but one clear-cut example of a word acquiring more positive connotations is the word *derrick*. It is an eponym from the name of Godfrey Derrick, who had a long and infamous career as a public executioner in England. He is reputed to have hung some 3,000 individuals from wooden towers constructed for the purpose. These towers, understandably, acquired the name of *derricks*. Thankfully, when contemporary speakers refer to derricks they are thinking of oil derricks, hay derricks, or the large cranes that are used for lifting heavy objects during construction.

**Pejoration** is the easiest of the processes to illustrate because it is the most common. An especially dramatic example is the word *tawdry* to mean “cheap

or shabby.” It comes from the name of Saint Audrey, the Anglo-Saxon princess sainted for her devotion to God. The only “sin” ever credited to her was a fondness for gold necklaces when she was a young woman. When she died of throat cancer in AD 679, she was convinced that her affliction came as punishment for worldly vanity. Nevertheless, at the annual St. Audrey’s Day Fair (October 17) held on the Isle of Ely, there was a brisk market in lace scarves and gold jewelry. Over the years, the peddlers’ wares became cheaper and their pronunciation less distinct so that eventually instead of selling Saint Audrey lace they were selling *tawdry* lace. By the 1700s, the word *tawdry* had developed such negative connotations as “cheap,” “ignoble,” and “gaudy.”

### Humorous Eponyms

**Chauvinist:** Nicolas Chauvin was a character in a play, who was overly zealous and loyal to Napoleon long after such patriotism was fashionable. Today the term refers to people who think they are better than others. For example, a *male chauvinist* thinks that he automatically should be paid a higher salary than a woman doing comparable work.

**Dunce** was taken from the name of philosopher John Duns Scotus, born in Scotland in 1265. He taught at both Oxford University and the University of Paris, and was known as a forward-thinking intellectual who attracted a cadre of elite followers. His ideas were well respected for 200 years after his death. However, when new ideas were advanced and debated, his followers refused to adjust their thinking and so were ridiculed and called *Dunsmen*, *dunses*, and finally *dunces*, with the spelling and the meaning of “stupidity” which we have today.

**Lavalier microphone:** The name for the kind of hanging microphone that we often see television news commentators wearing comes from the name of Louis XIV’s first “official mistress” to the king. She was Madame la Duchesse de la Vallière, and loved wearing large ornamental pendants on a chain around her neck. It was in her honor that such necklaces were named *lavaliers*.

**Mud, as in “Your name is Mud”:** Dr. Samuel Mudd was a doctor in rural Maryland. On the morning after US President Abraham Lincoln was shot in 1865, Dr. Mudd had not yet heard about the assassination and so when a man with a broken leg rode up to his house and asked for help, Dr. Mudd set the man’s leg and then rode into town, where he heard about President Lincoln being killed. When he returned to his farm, the man, who was John Wilkes Booth, had ridden away and Dr. Mudd was arrested and convicted for aiding in the murder of the President. Some historians say that this was the origin of the phrase, “Your name is mud.” However, earlier uses of the phrase have been uncovered and it is such a “natural” that Dr. Mudd’s misfortune probably encouraged, but did not inspire, the phrase.

**Mesmerize** comes from the name of Frank Anton Mesmer, an Austrian physician who in the late 1700s treated patients through hypnosis. He did not understand that he was using hypnosis because he thought he was getting help from the supernatural. There is no evidence that he was trying to fool anyone; nevertheless, his name came into the language with negative connotations because people thought he was using the dark arts for devious purposes. Over the years the meaning has softened so that today when theatre critics compliment a play as being *mesmerizing*, they are saying that the actors gave a “spellbinding” performance. On the other hand, if the mother of a young man is distressed about her son being *mesmerized* by a sexy, older woman, she is probably using the word with a meaning closer to the original.

The **Foxtrot dance** is an example of a purposely created eponym from 1913 when actor Harry Fox did a show-stopping dance in a successful Broadway musical. As a way of promoting the show and Fox’s career, the producers hired a dancer to work with Harry Fox to teach the steps to the public as the *Fox-Trot*. The term is listed this way, with the capital *F*, in the 1915 RCA Victor Catalog, while the *Tenth Edition of Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* gives 1916 as its first in-print date. The term got new life in 2016, when it was used in the title of a film based on the 2012 book *The Taliban Shuffle: Strange Days in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, which was written by *Chicago Times* journalist Kim Barker, and published by Random House in 2012. The creators of the film, which was released in 2016 by Paramount Pictures, wanted to distinguish the film from the kinds of grim news stories from Pakistan and Afghanistan that people were accustomed to reading, and so they came up with the more playful-sounding title of *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot*. Since 1975, these three words have been in the official list of words approved by the military that are used as replacements for single letters, but of course these three words do not appear together since the list is in alphabetical order. The list was devised during World War II, and was commonly called the “*Able, Baker, Charlie*” alphabet. It was needed because full words are easier to understand when people are communicating over distances where there might be interrupted by loud noises, radio static, weather conditions, or other complications of war.

In the film title, the letters *WTF* supposedly represent the letters for the words *Whiskey, Tango, and Foxtrot*, but in keeping with the spirit of the risqué film many viewers interpreted *WTF* as standing for the more vulgar “*What the F\*ck!*” This is an interpretation which fits with what reviewer P. J. O’Rourke wrote about the book as printed inside the front cover: “Kim Barker gives a true and amusing picture of hellholes and the reporters on assignment in them. But she breaks the journalist’s code of silence and reveals a trade secret of the hacks who cover hellholes: The hell of the holes is that they’re kind of fun.”



All of these examples illustrate the linguistic process of *generalization* because in each case a person's name has been enlarged to refer not only to the unique individual who "owns" the name, but also to something else. Once a name has been truly lexicalized, then it can undergo the same processes of change and development as do other words in a language.

### Changing Your Name

Changing your name is harder than changing either your address or your bank account, yet many people manage to do it – some informally, and some through the records of whatever governing system they happen to be a part of. A simple story from Alleen's childhood is how her younger brother, Wendell, tried to change his name when he was 5 years old. He was born in the middle of September in 1940, which was just six weeks before the United States Presidential election. The two finalists were Franklin D. Roosevelt and Wendell Willkie. We suspect that Alleen's parents planned to vote for Wendell Willkie and in their enthusiasm for him, named their new baby Wendell. Sadly for Wendell, Mr. Willkie lost the election to Franklin D. Roosevelt, who was elected three more times, and hence had the job of leading the United States through most of World War II.

When Wendell was 5 years old, the family moved from a small town in northern Arizona to the city of Phoenix. All went well, and her family with its five children soon fit into their new neighborhood with four of the children enrolling in the local school. They had been in their new neighborhood a couple of months, when on a Saturday morning, Alleen's mother told her to go down to the end of the block and tell Wendell to come home because lunch was ready. Alleen walked down the street and found the house where she thought he was. She knocked on the door and asked the mother who answered, "Is Wendell here?" When the mother said, "I don't think so," Alleen must have looked so surprised that the mother quickly added "Oh, Bobby's here!" Alleen caught on right away. Wendell, at age 5, had conspired to change his name by telling the neighbors he was Bobby. Alleen still feels bad that she was so insensitive that she just laughed and said "His name is Wendell!" and he has been Wendell ever since.

The name we carefully chose to put on the birth certificate of our oldest son was Kelvin Don Nilsen, but we always called him Kelly. We had chosen Kelvin because someone had given us a humorous book entitled *What Not to Name the Baby*. It was filled with the kind of humor that today's expectant parents can find online. The clever co-authors had drawn up a ridiculous forecast about the future of whatever baby happened to get the name being described. We chose *Kelvin* partly because it was not listed anywhere in the book.

However, when he was 4 years old, we moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan so that Don could enroll in the University of Michigan's Linguistics program. We enrolled Kelly in a pre-school program, and after the first day, he came home and declared that we should no longer call him *Kelly*. He wanted to be called by his "real name of Kelvin." When we asked "Why?" he explained that in his class there was a girl also named Kelly and so the teacher had the idea of calling one of them *Kelly Boy* and the other one *Kelly Girl*. He didn't like this arrangement, and so he told both the teacher and his parents that we should, from now on, use his "real name of Kelvin." Of course we agreed to abide by his wishes, but it was several months before we could do so without having to consciously think about it.

In 1968, we were living in married-student housing at the University of Michigan, and in time for the second semester, a new family from Curaçao moved into the apartment next to ours. We went over to get acquainted and to welcome them into the neighborhood. We were happy to see that their oldest son appeared to be about the same age as our Kelvin, who we introduced to the new family. The mother in the family introduced their son as Dolphie. Then in a later side-conversation, she explained to us that her son's "real name" was Adolph, "after his grandfather." Then she added, "but you know what happened to that name!" She was referring, of course, to the name of Adolph Hitler. We remembered this conversation when we recently read that one of the Marx Brothers of the famous American comedy team of the mid-1900s actually went through two name changes in his life. His given name had been *Adolph*, but the family had quickly changed it to *Arthur* when Adolph Hitler rose to power in Germany.

### Young Adults Changing their Names

Scholars who specialize in studying why people change their names have told us that it's more fun to work with young adults because children lack the power to change their names, while adults are so entrenched in their careers and their relationships that it usually takes some major event to "push them into a change." For example, they might be getting married or divorced, or maybe they have been arrested or somehow embarrassed under their original name and so by moving to a new town and taking a new name, they hope to get a new start in life.

When teenagers change their name it is often done "just for fun" or as a rite-of-passage. Several years ago, a boy from California named Peter Eastman, Jr. went to court to change his name to *Trout Fishing in America* in honor of Richard Brautigan's book of counterculture poetry. When the boy managed to get *Trout Fishing* listed as his name on his high school diploma, he explained to a reporter that it was a way of "breaking away" and saying, "I am not this little kid anymore. I want to be my own person." When the musical duo Keith

Grimwood and Ezra Idlet chose *Trout Fishing in America* for their group's name, also "in honor" of Brautigan's book, they probably had to pay for the privilege since they were using it for commercial purposes.

In fiction, young people are often shown to change their names. For example, in *The Great Gatsby* when F. Scott Fitzgerald introduces his title character, he writes:

James Gatz – that was really, or at least legally, his name. He had changed it at the age of seventeen and at the specific moment that witnessed the beginning of his career – when he saw Dan Cody's yacht drop anchor over the most insidious flat on Lake Superior. It was James Gatz who had been loafing along the beach that afternoon in a torn green jersey and a pair of canvas pants, but it was already Jay Gatsby who borrowed a rowboat, pulled out to the *Tuolumne* and informed Cody that a wind might catch him and break him up in half an hour. I suppose he'd had the name ready for a long time, even then.

### Funny and Not-So-Funny Name Changes

The two stories about the sense of shame related to the name of Adolph Hitler reminded us of the proscription against the name of *Lord Voldemort*, the villain in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. The other characters in the series are so afraid of Lord Voldemort, that they refer to him only as "He-who-must-not-be-named," but Harry is so brave that he regularly uses Lord Voldemort's name.

The famous Marx brothers grew up with lots of stage experience because their mother was a vaudeville performer. When the boys were old enough to become performers in their own right, their manager Art Fisher came up with a set of names designed to help people think of them as a comedy troupe. He chose *Groucho* for the "moody one," *Harpo* for the musician (he was the one who had been named *Adolph* and then *Arthur*); *Chico* for the one who chased women, i.e. "chicks", and *Gummo* for the brother who was said to sneak around backstage like a detective, i.e. a *gumshoe*. This old-fashioned name of *gumshoe* was used for policemen and detectives because to keep from making a noise when they walked, they wore rubber-soled shoes – what today we call *sneakers*. Zeppo was the youngest and the last one to be given a stage name. Perhaps Art Fisher chose to start his name with the last letter of the alphabet as a kind of finale.

The worldwide and long-lasting fame of the Marx Brothers was shown in 2008 when the Russian government invaded Georgia and announced that the small country of Abkhazia would no longer have to endure "the oppressive Georgian rule." In reaction to their new status, the country issued a postage stamp honoring Marx and Lenin. But people who looked closely at the stamp could see that it was a joke because the two people pictured on the stamp were the comedian Groucho Marx, alongside John Lennon, who was the most famous of the Beatles singing group.

These little stories illustrate four of the most basic reasons that people seek name changes.

**Ease of Pronunciation and Spelling:** 5-year-old Wendell wanted a name that was more common and easier to spell. Although he was not old enough to know about Wendell Wilkie, perhaps he sensed from adults that his name was somehow connected to “a loser.” Or maybe the children in his kindergarten class had somehow made fun of his name because it was longer and harder to spell and write than such names as *Bobby*, *Billy*, and *Jimmy*.

**Clarification of Gender:** 4-year-old Kelvin wanted a name that would correctly signal his gender. A cultural change is currently occurring in that many of today’s new parents are choosing to give their babies neutral-sounding names and are also choosing non-gender-specific clothing so as to give their children the right to make such choices for themselves when they are a little older.

**Avoiding Negative Connotations:** 6-year-old Dolphie was given a new name, not by him, but by his parents who were aware of the negative connotations which had developed around the given name of *Adolph Hitler*.

**Implying or Hinting at Characteristics:** The related set of humorous names given to the Marx brothers illustrates how clever naming can help to bring fame to people in show business.

### The Humorous Recycling of Names

Performers especially like recycling names that have already proven themselves. For example, David Copperfield is a character in a Charles Dickens novel, while the contemporary David Copperfield is a present-day magician. Engelbert Humperdinck was the German composer of the opera *Hansel and Gretel*, while the other Engelbert Humperdinck is a contemporary singer of pop songs. Tom Jones is a character in a Henry Fielding novel, and the other Tom Jones is a pop singer. What’s happening in these examples is that the present-day performers want instant fame, so they choose a name that is already famous, and then set about connecting themselves to the name so that they can share in its fame. The singer who chose Madonna as her stage name is another example. Several years ago, a member of the American Name Society interviewed Madonna about her name. She expressed surprise that anyone still thought of the mother of Jesus when hearing the name “Madonna.”

A name which was recycled in the other direction was that of Dolly, the first cloned sheep. The scientists who first managed to clone a sheep did it through the use of a mammary gland. They named the sheep *Dolly* in “honor” of the buxom and already famous Dolly Parton. It was really a publicity stunt, and we suspect that other scientists did not quite approve of bringing such serious research into the area of pop culture.

Another example of serious research being touted in the mass media was a headline on a five-column story in *USA Today* which read, “Multimillion-year mystery may be solved: How Lucy Died: Hominid had fatal fall, study surmises” (August 30, 2016). The story, written by Doyle Rice, started out with “Talk about cracking a cold case: Nearly 3.2 million years ago, Lucy died. Now we may know how.” *Lucy* is the name that, in 1974, scientists gave to the oldest set of hominid (*Australopithecus afarensis*) bones yet discovered. She was named *Lucy* because on the night she was found the Beatles song *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds* was being played in the camp. Not all scientists agreed with the conclusion of the news story, which was that Lucy was so short (only four feet tall) that she probably slept in a tree for safety and her arms were broken when she fell from the tree.

We are including this story here, not to solve the mystery of how Lucy died, but to bring up the idea of how Lucy’s current fame may relate to the fact that she was given a name. What does this tell us about the importance of personal names?

### Humorous Commercial Names

One of the reasons that English teachers have a hard time teaching kids to spell is the modeling that they see. If you take a quick look at the food items in your pantry or at the supplies in your medicine cabinet, you will probably be surprised at how many “misspelled” words you see. Businesses use creative spelling for three main reasons. First, it’s easier to get trademark protection if a company has a uniquely spelled name such as *Kwik Kopy* or *Playskool*. Second, creative spelling saves space. Government regulations require so much information on labels that companies no longer have room to advertise their product and so names become increasingly important. For example, *Sunkist* is an emotionally appealing reference to the Sunbelt states where oranges are grown, plus it takes only seven spaces compared to ten for the correctly spelled “sun kissed.” And if the Sears *DieHard* battery were to be two words instead of one, it would have been a description rather than one of the most successful trademarks of our era. *Nyquil* is an efficient combining of “night” and “tranquil,” *Danskin* of “dance” and “skin,” and *Allerest* of something like “rest your allergies.”

The third reason that companies create their own names relates to the kind of language play that we are accustomed to from poets and punsters. By creating names from morphemes that are already familiar to people, the companies can suggest qualities that they don’t have to prove. For example, the Honda *Acura* name was based on the French *acutesse*, the Italian *acutezza*, and the English *accurate* and *acumen*, all with meanings related to intelligence, sharpness, and acuteness. While *Acura* has positive connotations that work in an international

market, there is nothing for the company to prove since it hasn't made an overt claim. In a similar way, the *Achieva* car suggests "achievement," the Nissan *Maxima* suggests "maximum," the Mitsubishi *Precis* suggests "precise," and the Chevrolet *Lumina* suggests something like "luminary" or "luminous." These positive-sounding names for cars stand in contrast to the unfortunate name of *Nova*, which the Chevrolet company chose for one of its cars. This was fine when it was being sold in America where it reminded people of the positive connotations of "new" as in *novel*, but it did not sell as well to Spanish-speakers because the term reminded them of a Spanish phrase which means "won't go."

### Anthony Weiner and His Name

Anthony Weiner is an American politician from New York City. He was born in Brooklyn to a successful Jewish family in 1964. His family name of Weiner is a fairly common German surname referring to people coming from Wein (also called Vienna). The Germans were great meat eaters and when they came as early immigrants to America, they brought along their recipes for such favorites as *wiener schnitzel*, *wienerwurst*, *frankfurter*, and *Vienna sausages*. The tenth edition of the *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* dates the term *Vienna sausage* as coming to the United States in 1902. Its definition was "a short, slender frankfurter." The word *frankfurter* was dated as coming to the United States in 1894 from *Frankfurt am Main*, Germany and was defined as "a short cooked sausage (as of beef or beef and pork) that may be skinless or stuffed in a casing." The word *wiener* was dated at 1900 and was defined as "short for *wienerwurst*." The same dictionary identified the term *weenie* as an alternate of *wienie* and dated it to 1906 with its first definition being "FRANKFURTER" and its second definition being slang for "PENIS."

We were surprised to see how early this slang term came in, but we did know that because of the vulgar association, some Americans who had the name either changed their surname or made slight changes by spelling their name as *Weimer* or *Weidner*, while other people, including Anthony Weiner's parents, just ignored the vulgar connotation.

Anthony's father, Mort Weiner, was a Brooklyn attorney, while his mother, Frances Finkelstein Weiner, was a high-school math teacher. Anthony went to some of New York City's best schools, and enrolled in the State University of New York at Plattsburgh. In his junior year, he was an exchange student at William and Mary College in Virginia, where he became friends with fellow student Jon Stewart, who later became a noted TV political commentator and comedian. After graduating in 1985 with a degree in political science, Anthony went to work in Washington, DC for Chuck Shumer, a member of Congress representing New York's 9th District. Anthony worked in Shumer's Washington DC office for three years, and then with Shumer's encouragement

came “home” to work in Shumer’s New York office. Shumer encouraged Anthony to get into local politics, which he did. He was so successful that in 1991 when the New York City Council decided to have sixteen more members, Weiner successfully ran for one of the new positions and at age 27 became the youngest member ever to serve on the New York City Council.

He was highly commended for working to increase federal funding and the number of police officers in his district. He also helped to control dangerous dogs and he investigated and took action against the kind of cheap paint that contributed to the speed at which dangerous fires could spring up in the stairwells of rental properties. When Shumer, the Congressman who had first hired Anthony, decided to run for the higher job of Senator, Anthony stepped in and ran for Shumer’s position as a member of the US House of Representatives. He was elected in 1998 and was considered a rising star of the Democratic Party. In 2009, he became engaged to Huma Abedin, a beautiful and talented Jewish woman, who had been an aide to Hillary Clinton ever since she came to the White House as a college intern nearly twenty years earlier. Anthony and Huma married in 2010, with former President Bill Clinton officiating at the wedding. In December of 2011, Huma gave birth to their first son.

The reason for telling all this is that Anthony Weiner’s fairy-tale life came crashing down in the spring of 2012 when it became known that he had sent an explicit photo that he had taken of his “private parts” to an adult woman who had been following him on his public Twitter account. At first he denied having done so, however other women soon came forth to say that they had also received sexual messages, along with the same kind of “selfies” from Weiner. These charges opened the door to widespread criticisms of Anthony’s personal behavior as both an administrator of the people who worked for him and of his citizenship. For example, it was discovered that he still owed over \$2,000 to the City of Washington, DC for unpaid parking tickets. On June 16, 2011, he held a press conference where he admitted having “exchanged messages and photos of an explicit nature” with about six women over the last three years. He apologized for his earlier denials and resigned from his position in Congress. A reporter who was interviewing Anthony Weiner came right out and asked him, “Why did you do this?” Congressman Weiner stumbled around for a while and then hinted that it might have “something to do with my unfortunate last name.”

The media, including cartoonists, had great fun with the event, along with his “explanation.” The 2012 edition of *Best Editorial Cartoons of the Year* edited by Charles Brooks included eight different cartoons about the event. In this highly respected American publication, which has been printed every year since 1972, we don’t remember ever seeing this many cartoons on a single subject. One of the funniest was Charles Beyl’s for the *Sunday News* in Pennsylvania. It showed an ebullient Bill Clinton welcoming a much smaller, heads-down Weiner to the IGCS (I Got Caught Society). A placard by the door read “New



Member Night (No Pun Intended),” while Bill was saying “Welcome to the Club. You can sit with Arnold!” This was a reference to the fact that the former governor of California, Arnold Schwarzenegger, had admitted having an affair (one that resulted in a child) with the nanny who worked for the family in the California Governor’s mansion.

In Timothy Jackson’s cartoon from the *Chicago Defender*, a teacher was explaining to a boy who had brought in a news clipping for “Current Events,” that “Timmy – Your assignment for current events was to go on the Internet and find a photo of Congressman Weiner – not the Congressman’s wiener!”

The disgraced Weiner returned to New York City where over the next few years he gradually developed a new political life, which eventually led to him running for Mayor of New York City. Many people signed on to help so that late in the campaign Weiner was predicted to win. One of his former aides, Josh Kriegman, who was a filmmaker working with Elyse Steinberg, asked Weiner if he and Elyse could film the campaign because they thought it would be the kind of “wonderful, real-life come-back” story that people love. Weiner gave them permission and agreed that they would be free to film whatever was happening either in the campaign or behind the scenes, unless Weiner specifically asked them to stop filming. Kriegman had been an aide to Congressman Weiner and so they knew and respected each other.

During the four months that Weiner was running for mayor, the film makers collected over 400 hours of shooting, so that they had what seemed like “an unlimited amount” of new footage with which they could work. Weiner was now famous across the country and so he was nearly always followed by reporters and photographers, and then a second scandal broke. A different woman came forward with evidence that Weiner was still sending out illicit messages and photos of his bulging penis – covered by loose shorts. He was doing this under the made-up name of “Carlos Danger.”

When this second scandal broke the woman who had accused him let it be known that she was more than happy to talk to the press. When Weiner came to the couple’s office to share the bad news about his second offense with his wife, Huma, the photographers happened to be there. And although Weiner asked his own staff to leave while he talked to Huma, he did not ask the movie photographers to leave. Perhaps he sensed that his “confessing” to Huma had the potential for being one of the most moving and “honest” scenes in the documentary film, which it was. However, there were also a few ugly scenes where the movie makers were trying to help protect Weiner from tabloid photographers who wanted to get a photo of Weiner face-to-face with his most recent accuser.

Many people assumed that the movie would be the grand finale to this sad story because according to the news Weiner had checked himself into an institution for long-term treatment, but pretty soon little stories began leaking out. One said that the family was having a hard time gathering money to pay for

more than a month of treatment. While a tabloid story from a reporter said that by peeking through the institution's protective fence, he had caught a glimpse of Weiner riding a horse in what looked like a luxurious resort rather than a treatment center.

A few weeks before the Presidential election, James Comey, the head of America's FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation), held a press conference and announced that his agency had confiscated the home computer of Huma and Anthony so as to examine whether it contained information related to Hillary Clinton's use of a private email server. TV comedy host Bill Maher conjectured that the computer probably contained nothing more important than the guest list for Chelsea's wedding. Chelsea is the only daughter of Bill and Hillary Clinton, and actually within a couple of weeks, the FBI announced that there was nothing new on it about Hillary Clinton's management of her email. Since this all happened just a couple of weeks prior to the Presidential election, many people still think that it caused Hillary to lose enough votes to be defeated by Donald Trump.

But then came a new shocker. While the FBI was examining Huma and Anthony's computer, they found that Anthony had been using their home computer to continue his habit of what is now known as "sexting." One of the pictures that he sent showed him lying on an unmade bed with the couple's 4-year-old son lying next to him. When the picture was reprinted in newspapers and magazines, the child's face was put out of focus, but still it was a shocking picture, which the *New York Post* described as making readers "shriek" and then "vomit into a trashcan."

The second shocker came after the FBI discovered that Anthony had recently been "sexting" with a 15-year-old (i.e. an underaged) girl, which in the United States is a very serious crime. Abedin went to court and divorced Anthony, while Anthony went to court and then to jail. President Trump was quoted as saying that Abedin would be far better off without Weiner, then he turned the matter into a criticism of Hillary Clinton by saying that she was careless and negligent in allowing Weiner to have such close proximity to highly classified information.

Because of having written about all of this, we were interested to notice that on February 28, 2017, *USA Today* published a little feature on new words being added to Oxford dictionaries. Sexting was one of the eleven new terms that they wrote about. Included in the definition was the statement "the majority of participants are male."

We were also amused and intrigued by one of our free-thinking senior citizen students who stayed after the class where we talked about this whole issue, and asked us if maybe all the sexual problems that Woody Allen has had in his life might be related to Woody's name. When we looked puzzled, he said something to the effect that when teenage boys are talking about *a woody*, they are referring to an erect penis. We confessed that we hadn't thought of

that, but we did know that Woody Allen's given name had been Allen Stewart Konigsberg, and that when he was only 16, he began submitting jokes to newspapers, signing his name as Woody Allen. We had thought his new name was inspired by Woody Woodpecker, but maybe that wasn't what he had in mind at all.

### Points of Departure

1. The punch-lines of jokes make us look at ordinary language from new perspectives. Identify the italicized eponym in each of the sentences below and speculate on its origin. Explain how or why someone's personal name came into the English language as a regular word.
  - My doctor is afraid he will damage my *Achilles tendon* if he tries to remove the bone spurs on my heel.
  - Before I fly to a foreign country, I always look it up in an *Atlas* so that I will have some idea of what I am flying over.
  - The *Stanford-Binet* I.Q. test has been given to three generations of students.
  - We get to move in as soon as we put our *John Hancock* on the deed.
  - It was a *Disneyfied* version of an old classic.
  - They are getting married even though he suffers from *Lou Gehrig's* disease.
  - I wish our exercise leader would wear her *lavalier mike*.
  - I think it's funny that our bank gives directions in *braille* for depositing money at the drive-in window.
2. Using your knowledge of English and other languages, try matching these surnames, according to their meanings, from the left column with the names in the right column. If you don't know the meanings of some of the words, you can look them up in a regular dictionary.

Le Grande	Knoll
Fletcher	Waggoner
Atwater	Wickman
Oakland	Gross/Gordo/Nagy
Chandler	Forester
Redman	Miller
Wainwright	Rouse
Mueller	Arrowsmith
Hill	Rivers

3. Caconyms are names that sound bad. “Engelbert Humperdinck” is an example. Euphonyms are names that sound good. “Edna Saint Vincent Millay” is an example. Can you think of other examples? What gives these names their negative or positive connotations?
4. Names provide us with one of our most efficient ways of communication, as shown by how much information is packed into each of the names in these little witticisms. Explain the connections between the two words that when tied together make a little joke:
  - England has no kidney bank, but it has a Liverpool.
  - How does Moses make his tea? Hebrews it!
  - Jokes about German sausage are the Wurst.
  - I dropped out of my “History of Communism” class because of lousy Marx.

Identify the source of the humor in each joke. Can you think of any others jokes of this type that you have heard, or can you make one up?

5. Do you remember reading or having someone read to you A. A. Milne’s wonderful stories of *Winnie-the-Pooh*? If so, talk a little about the characters’ names and why you can still remember them. Many children are shocked at someone being named “Pooh.” They are also surprised at the name of Eeyore, which sounds like the sound a donkey makes. Way back in the 1970s, when Alleen was watching a broadcast of *Romper Room* with our own children, the teacher brought out *Winnie-the-Pooh* to read to the children. When she came to the part about the little donkey whose name was *Eeyore*, she called him *Eyesore*. One of the little boys on the program, who must have already heard the story, asked her why she called him *Eyesore*, and she shrugged and said, “I guess he had sore eyes.” Alleen was tempted to send the teacher an invitation to come and take a class in Children’s Literature, but she never got around to it. What do you think should have been done in such a situation?

### The Gilbert and Sullivan Operas

Probably the best examples of performance that includes theater, dance, and music are the operas of Gilbert and Sullivan. Some of the phrases from their operas have entered the English language; examples include “short, sharp shock,” “What, never? Well, hardly ever!” “let the punishment fit the crime,” and “A policeman’s lot is not a happy one.” According to John Bush Jones, Gilbert and Sullivan were “the primary progenitors of the twentieth century musical,” because they demonstrated that “musicals can address contemporary social and political issues without sacrificing entertainment value.” Gilbert’s complex rhyme schemes and satirical lyrics have influenced such twentieth-century Broadway lyricists as P. G. Wodehouse, Cole Porter, Ira Gershwin, Lorenz Hart, and Oscar Hammerstein.

Even in the 2015 musical *Hamilton*, George Washington ironically refers to himself as “the model of a modern major general,” which he rhymes with “men are all” and “pedestal.” Lin-Manuel Miranda, the author of these new lyrics, commented that he “always felt like ‘mineral’ wasn’t the best possible rhyme.”

Noël Coward (1899–1973) wrote in the Introduction to *The Noël Coward Song Book*:

The lyrics and melodies of Gilbert and Sullivan were hummed and strummed into my consciousness at an early age. My father sang them; my mother played them; my nurse, Emma, breathed them through her teeth while she was washing me, dressing me and undressing me and putting me to bed. My aunts and uncles, who were legion, sang them singly and in unison at the slightest provocation.

There are many allusions to Gilbert and Sullivan song lyrics. “A short, sharp shock” from *The Mikado* (1885) has been used in various political manifestos. “Let the punishment fit the crime,” also from *The Mikado*, is often used in British political debates. In 1996, Virginia Bottomley, heritage secretary under John Major, sent up Tony Blair in a parody of “When I was a lad” from *HMS Pinafore* (1878), and in October of 2010, Ron Butler went viral on YouTube with a video pastiche of the Major-General’s Song as he mildly lampooned President Obama. US Supreme Court Justice William Rehnquist added gold

stripes to his judicial robes after seeing them used by the Lord Chancellor in a production of *Iolanthe* (1882). However, The Lord Chancellor Lord Falconer had the opposite reaction when he saw the office of the Lord Chancellor being ridiculed. He supported the move to disband that particular office in British government. Peter Lilley did a pastiche of “I’ve got a little list” from *The Mikado* where he listed those he was against, the “sponging socialists,” the “young ladies who get pregnant just to jump the housing queue,” and others. Some American courts appear to come to the same conclusions as those reached in Gilbert and Sullivan operas.

In talking about how the Lower Court rulings are treated by rulings of the Supreme Court, the Lower Courts are said to be like the policemen in *The Pirates of Penzance* (1879). Their “lot is not a happy one.” The “Major-General’s Song” in *The Pirates of Penzance* might be the most famous song in all of the Gilbert and Sullivan operas. It is a patter song that satirizes the modern educated British Army officer of the latter nineteenth century. The lyrics are as follows:

I am the very model of a modern Major-General,  
I’ve information vegetable, animal, and mineral,  
I know the kings of England, and I quote the fights historical  
From Marathon to Waterloo, in order categorical;  
I’m very well acquainted, too, with matters mathematical,  
I understand equations, both the simple and quadratical,  
About binomial theorem I’m teeming with a lot o’ news [but here the  
Major general can’t think of a proper rhyme so he finishes with:]  
With many cheerful facts about the square of the hypotenuse.

Phrases from Gilbert and Sullivan operas are also used in song lyrics. Pink Floyd use the phrase “a short, sharp shock” in *The Dark Side of the Moon*. “Let the punishment fit the crime” is used in *Magnum, PI* (1980–1988), and also in *The Parent Trap* (1961) when the camp director quotes that phrase before imposing a sentence on the twins. In *The Mikado*, the character Pooh-bah holds many exalted offices, including “First Lord of the Treasury, Lord Chief Justice, Commander-in-Chief, Lord High Admiral, Archbishop of Titipu, and Lord Mayor.” So Gilbert and Sullivan fans remember all of these titles when they come across the “Grand Poobah” in *The Flintstones* (1960–1966), and also in *Happy Days* (1974–1984) as the title of a high-ranking official in a men’s club. This is also clearly a spoof of the exalted positions found in men’s clubs like the Freemasons, the Shriners, and the Elks Club.

As part of his act in the 1960s, comedian Allan Sherman sang many parodies of Gilbert and Sullivan songs. He sang, “When I was a lad, I went to Yale,” based on the patter song in *HMS Pinafore* (1878); at the end he thanks old Yale, he “thanks the Lord and he thanks his father, who is chairman of the board.”

He sang “Little Butterball,” a parody of “I’m Called Little Buttercup” from *HMS Pinafore*, deprecating himself for getting fat. His “You need an analyst, a psychoanalyst” is a parody of “I’ve Got a Little List” from *The Mikado*, which gives reasons that a person might want to seek psychiatric help. Sherman’s “The Bronx Bird Watcher” is a parody of “Titwillow” from *The Mikado*. But in Sherman’s version, the bird sings with a Yiddish accent and Sherman is so impressed that he takes the bird down from its branch and gives it to his wife, who misunderstands the gift and fricassees the bird. The birds last words are, “Oy! Willow! Tit-Willow! Tit-Willow!”

In *The Producers*, one of the actors auditioning for the part of Hitler in *Springtime for Hitler* begins his audition with Nanki-Poo’s song, “A Wand’ring Minstrel I.” After just nine words, the director cuts him off abruptly, saying “THANK YOU!” In two episodes of *Blackadder Goes Forth* (1989), parts of “A Wand’ring Minstrel I” are played, and the movie poster for *The Little Shop of Horrors* (1986) parodies the song “The Flowers that Bloom in the Spring, tra la!” but changes the word “Bloom” to “Kill.” In the 1981 film *Chariots of Fire*, Harold Abrahams sees his wife as one of the Three Little Maids. Many American television programs have featured either “Three Little Maids,” or the “Little List” songs, and the Capitol Steps (a song-and-dance troupe from Washington DC) have performed parodies entitled “Three Little Kurds from School Are We” about conditions in Iraq, and “Three Little Wives of Newt,” lampooning Newt Gingrich’s marital issues.

Gilbert and Sullivan operas are significant because they are salient, dramatic, and memorable. When we leave a Gilbert and Sullivan performance, the Gilbert and Sullivan performance does *not* leave us; we continue to hum the tunes and mouth the lyrics long after the actual performance. Lerner and Lowe’s *My Fair Lady* (1964) has this same quality, but let’s go back in time to begin the *My Fair Lady* story. In the narrative poem *Metamorphosis*, Ovid (43 BCE–c. AD18) wrote about a sculptor named Pygmalion who created a statue so perfect that he fell in love with the statue he had carved. During the Festival of Aphrodite, Pygmalion made offerings at the altar of Aphrodite, but he was too frightened to admit his desire – that he would like to have a bride who would be the living likeness of his ivory girl. When he went home, he kissed his ivory statue and found her lips to be warm. He kissed her again and discovered that the statue had lost its hardness. Aphrodite had granted Pygmalion’s wish.

Now let’s skip ahead to 1913, when George Bernard Shaw wrote a novel by the name of *Pygmalion*. In Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, Eliza Doolittle is the Cockney flower girl who represents Galatea of the Greek myth. She is transformed into a lady by Henry Higgins to demonstrate Shaw’s socialist belief that the upper classes are not naturally superior, but rather that their social advantage is the result of having had good food, healthy living, decent clothes, and training



in the proper ways to move and to talk. In the play, Eliza slips and uses the British Cockney term “bloody likely,” but even this is misinterpreted by her aristocratic boyfriend, Freddy Eynsford-Hill, who is sure that he is hearing one of the latest expressions in the slang of the “fast-set.” Even though Freddy is much higher than Eliza in the social register, he is presented as a fool in Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, and is no real match for Eliza. Professor Higgins, on the other hand, is a perfect match for Eliza, even though Eliza has been used by Higgins, and she wants to get back at him.

When Professor Higgins is in the town square analyzing everyone’s accent, and telling everyone where they’re from, he meets Eliza Doolittle, and sings, “Look at her, a prisoner of the gutters / Condemned by every syllable she utters. / By right, she should be taken out and hung / For the cold-blooded murder of the English tongue.” And then he generalizes his song to “Why can’t the English teach their children how to speak?” and continues with “This verbal class distinction, by now should be antique,” and then he relates both to the crowd and to Eliza Doolittle when he sings, “If you spoke, like she does, instead of the way you do / Then you might be selling flowers, too.” Higgins says that “An Englishman’s way of speaking absolutely classifies him. / Whenever he speaks, he makes some other Englishman despise him.” Then he sings about the English in other countries: “The Scotch and the Irish leave you close to tears. / There even are places, where English completely disappears. In America they haven’t used it for years.” Higgins is perplexed. “Norwegians learn Norwegian. / The Greeks are taught their Greek. / In France – every Frenchman knows his language – A to zed,” but then he continues, “The French don’t care what they do, actually, as long as they pronounce it properly.” And then, “Arabians learn Arabian with the speed of summer lightning. / The Hebrews learn it backwards, which is absolutely frightening.” Then Higgins concludes, “To use proper English you’re regarded as a freak. / Why can’t the English learn – to – speak?”

Humor scholar, Paul Grawe, considers Eliza to be an “endangered heroine,” who has “truly unparalleled verve and social genius.” Even though she is twenty years younger than her teacher, she is attracted to him enough to become the object of his experiments. Eliza explains why she allowed herself to be part of Higgins’s experiment: “What I done [correcting herself] what I did was not for the dresses and the taxis: I did it because we were pleasant together and I come – came – to care for you; not to want you to make love to me, and not forgetting the difference between us, but more friendly like.” Through the play, she becomes increasingly hostile to him as she realizes how little Higgins is willing to learn about basic human kindness. Nevertheless, as her antagonism increases, her fascination increases correspondingly. Finally, she sees her opportunity to get even, or as she says, “to get a bit of her own back,” by making Higgins into a man in the same way that he has made her into

a woman. She realizes that Higgins is emotionally a child, but Eliza is smart, is driven, and is a glutton for hard work.

Everyone who has seen Lerner and Lowe's *My Fair Lady* – and that means everyone – is able to sing the tunes and the words to “I’m an ordinary man,” “I could have danced all night,” “I’ve grown accustomed to his face,” “With a little bit of luck,” “Get me to the church on time,” “Wouldn’t it be lovely,” or “Just you wait, Henry Higgins, just you wait.” In “The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain,” Henry Higgins teaches Eliza Doolittle proper English pronunciations with such exercises as “In Hertford, Hereford and Hampshire, hurricanes hardly ever happen,” and “How kind of you to let me come.” When Eliza gets all of the vowels correct in “The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain,” Henry Higgins shouts, “I think she’s got it,” and Higgins and Doolittle are off on another duet.

We will conclude this section with an American example: Meredith Wilson's *The Music Man* (1962). Meredith Wilson and Franklin Lacey wrote the original story, and Meredith Wilson wrote the final music and lyrics. At the beginning of this musical we hear “Ya got trouble, / Right here in River City.” Later in the song we hear “One, Two, Three, Four, Five, Six Pockets on a pool table, / Pockets that mark the difference between a gentleman and a Bum / with a capital B and that rhymes with P and that stands for Pool.” Later, “Ya got Trouble / Right here in River City. / With a capital T and that rhymes with P and that stands for Pool. / Gotta figure out a way to keep the young ones moral after school.” Almost anyone who has seen *The Music Man* can sing “The Wells Fargo Wagon,” “Marian the Librarian,” “Gary Indiana,” “Shipooopi,” “Lida Rose,” “Pick-A-Little, Talk-a-Little / Good Night Ladies,” and of course “Seventy-Six Trombones.” Here goes:

Seventy-six trombones led the big parade  
With a hundred and ten cornets close at hand.  
They were followed by rows and rows  
Of the finest virtuosos,  
The cream of ev'ry famous band.

And that's how the Tragedy of River City became a Romance.

### **Irony, Satire, and Parody in the Movies**

Humor, irony, satire, and parody all play major roles in the movies. Mel Brooks is a master of parody. *Blazing Saddles* (1974) satirizes the racism of Hollywood movies about the American West. The hero is a black sheriff in an all-white town. The film contains many anachronisms such as the Count Basie Orchestra playing “April in Paris” in America's Wild West, and Slim Pickens referring to the *Wide World of Sports*. In this movie, many of the townspeople have the

same name, “Johnson.” There is also much cowboy humor. For example, at dinner time a bunch of cowboys have beans for dinner and then they have a farthing contest. *Young Frankenstein* (1974) is an affectionate parody of the classic horror film such as the film adaptation of Mary Shelley’s novel, *Frankenstein*. This movie was a box-office smash, listed as number twenty-eight in *Total Film* magazine’s “List of the 50 Greatest Comedy Films of All Time.” Dr. Frederick Frankenstein is a lecturing physician at an American medical school. He becomes exasperated whenever anyone brings up the subject of his grandfather, Victor Frankenstein, the famous mad scientist. Frederick Frankenstein tries to get back his good name by pronouncing his name “Frahnkenstein” and by teaching his monster to dance in top hat and tails. When Frederick goes to Transylvania to collect his inheritance after the death of Victor Frankenstein, Frederick meets Igor, a hunchbacked, bug-eyed servant, who spends his time lurking around the castle.

The plotline of Mel Brooks’ *The Producers* (2005) is that two producers sell stocks in a play, and then try to produce a play that is so lousy that they won’t have to pay off the stockholders, i.e. the people who invested their money in the production of the play. However, the play is so lousy as a tragedy that it is a success as a comedy. “Springtime for Hitler” is a play within the play of *The Producers*. It is even more exaggerated and edgy than the rest of the production. Mel Brooks’ *High Anxiety* (1977) spoofs Alfred Hitchcock-type thrillers. His *Spaceballs* (1987) spoofs such space epics as *Star Wars* (1977–2017). In his *History of the World, Part I* (1981), Brooks plays the roles of Moses, Louis XIV, and Comicus, a “stand-up philosopher” who can’t get a job and so has to work as a waiter, asking at the Last Supper, “Are you all together, or is it separate checks?”

In *Children of a Lesser God* (1986), when Marlee Matlin, the deaf protagonist, wanted to sign her disagreement, she laid her right arm over her left arm and lifted her fingers to sign the horns of a bull while the fingers of her left hand wagged back and forth under her right elbow as if the bull were relieving itself.

In movies, wish fulfillment often results in exaggerated plots. Wish fulfillment for children can be seen in *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* (1971). Wish fulfillment for young adults can be seen in *National Lampoon’s Animal House* (1978). And for adults we can see the post-divorce hostilities in *War of the Roses* (1989), which is also a kind of dark wish fulfillment. Movie producers are always looking for gimmicks or MacGuffins that will allow their stars to shine. The stage play *Harvey* (1944) was a perfect movie vehicle for tall and lanky Jimmy Stewart, who looked up to an even taller, imaginary white rabbit. In the movies, a MacGuffin is a plot device that helps the protagonist achieve his desired goals. A person, place, or thing can show up unexpectedly, or an unexpected victory, survival, or pronouncement can advance the

plot. Alfred Hitchcock popularized the term “MacGuffin.” In a 1939 lecture at Columbia University in New York City, he told the following story about two men on a train: One man says, “What’s that package up there in the baggage rack?” And the other answers, “Oh, that’s a MacGuffin.” The first one asks, “What’s a MacGuffin?” “Well,” the other man says, “It’s an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands.” The first man says, “But there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands,” and the other man answers, “Well then, that’s no MacGuffin!” So in a way, a MacGuffin is actually nothing at all – but at the same time it may be the most significant thing in the plot. It’s enigmatic. Hitchcock’s MacGuffins helped him to assert that his films were in fact not what they appeared to be on the surface. Ernest Hemingway stated it a different way. He said that his stories are like icebergs – three fourths of them are hidden from view.

In *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope* (1977), George Lucas describes R2–D2 as “the main driving force of the movie.” He adds that R2–D2 is what they call in the movie business a MacGuffin. It’s the object of everybody’s search. This is consistent with Hitchcock’s definition of a MacGuffin as “the object around which the plot revolves.” But for Hitchcock, the function of the MacGuffin is hidden; for Lucas, the function is revealed. In *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), the MacGuffin is the Maltese Falcon. In *Citizen Kane* (1941) it is the meaning of “Rosebud.” In *Mission Impossible III* (2006) it is the rabbit foot. In *Titanic* (1997) it is the Heart of the Ocean necklace. In Monty Python’s *The Holy Grail* (1975), the MacGuffin is the Holy Grail.

Whoopie Goldberg’s singing ability was highlighted in *Sister Act* (1992) where Whoopie is a singer on the run from the Mafia. She hides in a convent and transforms the nuns into singing performers. The large, muscular and blond Arnold Schwarzenegger is contrasted with the short, plump, dark-haired twin Danny DeVito in *Twins* (1988). Arnold Schwarzenegger’s size and muscles are also featured ironically in *Kindergarten Cop* (1990).

Humorous quest stories can be as realistic as *Biloxi Blues* (1988), the autobiographical story of Neil Simon’s 1945 conscription into the army, or as ridiculous as *Pee-wee’s Big Adventure* (1985) in which Pee-wee Herman goes searching for his lost bicycle. *Finding Nemo* (2003) is another quest story, as is *Toy Story* (1995). Even *Borat* (2006) is a kind of quest story.

Many movies are parodies of other pieces of literature. Monty Python’s *The Life of Brian* (1979) is an irreverent parody of the story of Jesus Christ. Brian denies that he is the Christ. His followers declare that only the true Christ would deny his divinity. The movie ends with Brian being crucified with many other people. And they are all singing, “Always look on the bright side of life.”

*Roxanne* (1987) is a parody of *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1897). *Men in Black* (1997) parodies the whole genre of movies about secret government agencies

and aliens from outer space. *Airplane* (1980) parodies the disaster movies that were produced in the 1970s. When Leslie Nielsen asks Robert Hays if he can fly the plane, Hays responds, "Surely you can't be serious?" Nielson responds, "Don't call me Shirley."

*Caddyshack* (1980) is a parody not so much of other movies as of the game of golf itself. In the same way, *Stir Crazy* (1980) contains much prison humor. *Bull Durham* (1988) is filled with baseball humor. And *Analyze This* (1999) has humor about psychiatric counseling. Woody Allen's *Bullets over Broadway* (1994) and Neil Simon's *The Sunshine Boys* (1972) and *Some Like It Hot* (1959) are filled with inside jokes about show business. *The Pink Panther* (1963), *The Naked Gun* (1988), *Fargo* (1996), and *Pulp Fiction* (1994) are detective spoofs. *The Police Academy* (1984–) films are police spoofs.

Producers and theater managers are now putting more and more humor into the peripherals that surround movie-goers. Charlie Chaplin or Harold Lloyd come onto the screen with the message: "Watch movies in the old-fashioned way – in Silence." The advertisement for the theater's THX sound system is done as a sophisticated cartoon. Today, at the end of movies, there are often funny outtakes or original messages. At the end of *Spice World* (1997) the five Spice Girls stare out at the audience and Sporty says, "Why do people sit there at the end of the film and watch the credits go up?" Ginger answers, "It's probably the sad anticlimax. It's all over. Back to reality."

Because they are not language-dependent, silent movies had a universal appeal that the talkies don't have. For example, every year in Gabrovo, Bulgaria, there is a humor festival in which a large percentage of the town residents put on their derby hats and oversized pants and shoes, pick up their canes, and go about the city turning square corners like Charlie Chaplin did. Other icons of the silent films include Buster Keaton, Douglas Fairbanks Sr., the Keystone Kops, and Fatty Arbuckle. In vaudeville, Buster Keaton was the human mop who never smiled. He also never smiled in movies, even when the side of a house came falling down around his ears. (He happened to be standing where there was an open window in the wall, so he was OK.)

Screwball comedies are the zany but romantic movies that were produced during the Depression and on into the early 1940s. Virtually all screwball comedies included a male–female conflict, with one or both of them being rich. Part of their appeal was that these movies were always set in the elegant surroundings of the idle rich, with occasional visits to the poorer sides of life. Modern screwball comedies, like the earlier screwball comedies, are based on the slapstick relationships that can occur in the battle of the sexes. They include *Some Like It Hot* (1959), *Tootsie* (1982), *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993), *War of the Roses* (1989), and *Arthur* (1971). The rich theme especially can be seen in *Trading Places* (1983).

Another recent trend in movies is tragicomedy. The Italian film *Life Is Beautiful* (2012) is set in a Nazi death camp. The humor and irony in the film serve as a foil to make the horror all the more terrible.

Students studying Performing Arts are learning how to use their voices and/or their bodies, often in relation to other things or objects, to artistically convey emotions or aesthetics for the benefit of audiences. In a wide range of cultures, and throughout time, large groups of people have gathered to watch various types of theatrical, dance and/or musical performances. Actors like Gene Kelly, Fred Astaire, and Judy Garland were versatile enough to excel in acting, singing, and dancing. The performers' costumes and appearances have to be perfect, as do the stage lighting and sound. There is a large range of performing arts that includes dance, music, opera, theater (including musical theater), magic, illusion, pantomime, spoken word, puppetry, circus acts, performance art, recitation and public speaking, improvisational theater, and stand-up comedy.

### Darker Humor in the Movies

In 1996, five of Don's graduate students walked into his office with a proposal. They wanted him to teach a seminar about dark humor in the movies, and they wanted to be in charge of the seminar. The first assignment that they gave to Don was to watch *Pulp Fiction* (1994), so dutifully, Don and Alleen went to the theater to watch *Pulp Fiction*, but they arrived late, and had difficulty understanding the movie. Also, there was so much violence that they got up and left the theater. When Don reported this to his students, they said, "Your second assignment is to go and see *Pulp Fiction* again." This they did, and this time, they found the humor in the violence. *Pulp Fiction* was written and directed by Quentin Tarantino. It's a parody of pulp magazines and novels printed on cheaply made wood-pulp paper, and featuring near-naked women on their covers. One funny scene is when a hostage is being held at gunpoint in the back seat of a speeding car. The car hits a bump, the gun goes off, killing the hostage. A related funny scene is when the killers have to wash off all of the blood at a nearby home – actually, it was the home of Quentin Tarantino. Another funny scene is when the boss tells a hit-man to take care of his wife, but the hitman doesn't know whether this means to sexually please her or to kill her.

During this seminar the Nilsens also watched (on Netflix) *The Little Shop of Horrors* (1960), *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *Harold and Maude* (1971), *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979), *Beetlejuice* (1988), *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), and *Fargo* (1996). *Little Shop of Horrors* is a black comedy farce about a fumbling florist's assistant who cultivates a plant that feeds on human flesh and blood. The film slowly gained a cult following, and was the inspiration for an off-Broadway musical with the same name.



*Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* is a political black comedy film that satirizes the Cold War fears of nuclear conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States. When people get into a fight over differences of opinion, one of the characters says, “You can’t fight here. This is the War Room.” Another funny scene is when Major T. J. Kong, dressed as a cowboy, rides the bomb down to its final destination. At the end of the film, just as Dr. Strangelove gets out of his wheelchair and proclaims that he can walk again, the doomsday device kicks into operation and the film ends with a montage of nuclear explosions accompanied by Vera Lynn’s World War II-era song, “We’ll Meet Again.”

A much darker shade of film noir is Anthony Burgess’s *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), a dystopian film that employs disturbing and violent images to satirize psychiatry, juvenile delinquency, youth gangs, and other social, political, and economic issues in a dystopian near-future England. The film is about aversion therapy, but rather than curing the youths, this aversion therapy makes them all the more violent.

*Harold and Maude* (1971) is a romantic black comedy drama about the courtship of a very young Harold and a very old Maude. Harold, who is intrigued with death, develops a relationship with 79-year-old Maude, who breaks a few rules here and there as she lives life to the fullest. This film is ranked number 45 on the American Film Institute’s list of “100 Funniest Movies of all Time.”

In *Monty Python’s Life of Brian* (1979), a Jewish man named Brian is mistaken for the Messiah. He tells everyone that he is *not* the Messiah, and they respond by saying that only the True Messiah would say that He is not the Messiah. This type of humor continues throughout the film until Brian’s crucifixion at the end of the film as Brian and the other people being crucified join together in singing, “Always look on the bright side of life ...”

*Beetlejuice* (1988) is a Tim Burton film starring Michael Keaton as Beetlejuice. The film is about a recently deceased couple (played by Alec Baldwin and Geena Davis) who become ghosts haunting their former home, when they encounter a devious ghost in the Netherworld who tries to scare away the new inhabitants

In *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), written and directed by Quentin Tarantino, the Mexican standoff is funny. Joe and Eddie are both pointing their guns at Mr. White, who is aiming at Joe. Mr. Orange is out of ammunition after shooting Mr. Blonde, and Mr. Pink is away from the rest of them (off-camera) pleading for everyone to calm down. You’ll have to guess at what happens next.

*Fargo* (1996) was written, produced, edited, and directed by Joel and Ethan Coen. In *Fargo* the chipper scene was an example of dramatic irony in that some characters and the audience knew things that other characters didn’t know. The killer was trying to get rid of the evidence by stuffing the dead body into a wood chipper, but the ground was covered with snow, and the red blood



of the body made the snow red, thereby attracting people to the scene of the crime. It was also funny that the foot of the victim is still wearing a sock. At the 1996 Cannes Film Festival, Joel Coen won the Best Director Award, and the film also won seven Academy Award nominations. Frances McDormand won the Best Actress Oscar, and the Coens won in the Best Original Screenplay category.

After this class, the Nilsens continued to look for the dark comedy in gallows-humor films, and we found it in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1998), *The Big Lebowski* (1998), *American Beauty* (1999), *Baby Driver* (2017), and *Three Billboards* (2017). *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1998) was based on Hunter S. Thompson's novel with the same name. It was written and directed by Terry Gilliam, and starred Johnny Depp as Raoul Duke and Benicio del Toro as Dr. Gonzo. These two journalists were investigating what Las Vegas was like for people under the effect of mind-bending drugs. Because of the release of The Criterion Collection on DVD, this film has become a cult classic. This film is in the tradition of "Gonzo Journalism," which contends that a reporter must become a part of the story in order to be able to acquire a real understanding of the story being reported.

*The Big Lebowski* (1998) was written, produced, and directed by Joel and Ethan Coen, and starred Jeff Bridges, John Goodman, Julianne Moore, and Steve Buscemi. Jeff Bridges is Jeffrey (The Dude) Lebowski, a Los Angeles "dude" devoted to bowling. The Dude is attacked, because in the movie there is also a millionaire by the name of Jeffrey Lebowski, and the wrong Jeffrey Lebowski is assaulted. In the meantime, the millionaire Lebowski's wife has been kidnapped and the other Lebowski, the Dude, is told he must deliver the ransom in order to secure her release. But then the Dude's friend, Walter Sobchak (played by John Goodman), schemes to keep the ransom money, and a situation that couldn't get any worse gets worse, until the end of the film when "Donny" Kerabatsos (played by Steve Buscemi), is cremated, and his ashes are thrown into the sea that he loved – just as a gust of wind comes off from the sea and blows the ashes into the faces of the Dude and Walter.

*American Beauty* (1999) stars Kevin Spacey as Lester Burnham, a 42-year-old advertising executive who is going through a midlife crisis. In the tradition of Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*, Lester Burnham becomes obsessed with his teenage daughter's best friend, Angela. The film satirizes American middle-class notions of beauty and personal satisfaction, sexuality, materialism, self-liberation, and redemption. At the Academy Awards, *American Beauty* won the Best Picture Award, the Best Actor Award (for Kevin Spacey), the Best Original Screenplay Award, and the Best Cinematography award.

The protagonist in *Baby Driver* (2017) is named "Baby." When he was a child, Baby was involved in a car accident that killed his parents and left him with tinnitus, which he blocks out by listening to music on his iPod. Baby's ability to focus on his music gives him the ability to focus on other things as

well, such as listening to complicated instructions, or speeding away in a get-away car. Baby is not a criminal, but he has to drive because he is in debt to the boss. Baby is caught in a “Catch 22.” When he tells the boss, “One more job and we’re done,” the boss responds with “One more job and we’re straight.”

*Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017) stars Frances McDormand as Mildred, Sam Rockwell as Dixon, and Woody Harrelson as Willoughby. Mildred (McDormand) is a mother who rents three billboards to bring public attention to her daughter’s unsolved murder. The billboards read “RAPED WHILE DYING,” “AND STILL NO ARRESTS?” and “HOW COME, CHIEF WILLOUGHBY?” The people of Ebbing, Missouri were upset by the billboards, especially Sheriff Bill Willoughby and racist officer Jason Dixon, partly because they all realize that Willoughby has terminal pancreatic cancer, so Mildred and her depressed son Robbie are harassed and threatened, and her signs are burned down by an arsonist. Mildred retaliates by burning down the police station. But Mildred doesn’t have enough money to replace the three billboards. Ironically, the money to replace the billboards is secretly provided by Willoughby, who is dying of cancer. Willoughby’s motive for providing the money for the billboards is that these billboards provide the incentive for the people of Ebbing, Missouri to join together in common cause.

In *The Glass Castle* (2017), hippie Rex Walls (played by Woody Harrelson) is married to hippie Rose Mary Walls (played by Naomi Watts), and they have four hippie children, Lori, Jeannette, Brian, and Maureen. The movie is based on a memoir written by the second child (Jeannette) who leaves the hippie lifestyle to become a professional writer. In the movie, the Walls children are home-schooled by two very bright but unorthodox hippie parents, and the “Glass Castle” is Rex’s dream. But Rex Walls dreams much larger than he can accomplish, because he is a drunkard who must support his addiction to booze. But Rex is also very smart and very creative. For Christmas, Rex allows Jeannette to choose her favorite star as a Christmas present. She chooses Venus, which is a planet, not a star, but Rex allows her to have Venus as her special gift. When Jeannette says that it’s not possible to give someone Venus as a present, Rex responds that Columbus claimed America for Queen Isabella of Spain, and so it would be perfectly fine to claim Venus as Jeannette’s personal star ... as long as it hasn’t already been claimed by someone else. Because the Walls family is always breaking the law in many different ways, they are constantly “ski-doodling” from place to place, but space in the car is limited, so each member of the family is allowed to take only one thing. Jeannette wants to take her rock collection, but Rex says that’s more than one thing, so she decides to take her favorite rock – a geode. For a later move, Jeannette wants to take her bicycle, but that’s too big, so again she decides to take her geode. The geode is a MacGuffin (Alfred Hitchcock’s term). It’s a special thing that moves not only the plot, but the characterization as well. The imagined plans for the glass castle is another MacGuffin, as is the planet Venus.

### Points of Departure

1. Look around and see if you can find a new example in the media of an allusion to children's literature. If so, bring it to class and talk about why it was used and how it helped to communicate a message.
2. Listed below are the name changes of several well-known comedians. Read their new names aloud and see if you can find something in their name that makes you think of humor. Also, look to see if they saved or re-used something from their original name – maybe their initials or part of their original name. Names scholars have noticed that it is common for people – even for criminals who change their name – to want to retain some of the name they grew up with.

Phyllis Driver → Phyllis Diller

Herbert Gleason → Jackie Gleason

Leonard Hackett → Buddy Hackett

Joseph Keaton → Buster Keaton

Shelton Lee → Spike Lee

Milton Superman → Soupy Sales

Clerow Wilson → Flip Wilson

**Possible Answers:** Diller sounds like “dilly”; Jackie is less formal than Herbert and Gleason contains the idea of “glee”; “Buddy” is a more friendly sounding name while “Hackett” already has humorous connotations connected with the word “hack”; “Buster” might remind people of “busting out in laughter”; “Spike,” as in “spike the ball,” is a quick and pointed action sort of like a joke; “Soupy Sales” rolls off the tongue and presents a humorous image; and “flip” is a word that describes a certain kind of humor.

3. When Caryn Johnson changed her name to Whoopi Goldberg, she obviously was hoping to communicate that she was “funny” as in the phrase “whooping with laughter,” but she also communicated something about ethnicity by choosing *Goldberg* as her family name. She had recently converted to Judaism and so wanted to reflect this in her name. Because the United States was founded by people from many different countries, we have a wide variety of surnames, each with its own connotations. Explain why a name like Caryn Johnson would not be a good name for a performer, while a name like Whoopi Goldberg is a great name.

4. Contrast sitcoms with vaudeville and burlesque shows in terms of audience and appropriateness of material. What about late-night comedy hosts and their guests?
5. In telling anecdotes, explain the importance of significant details, and discuss how and why comedians often provide details that are not actually known. For a joke, does the detail have to be true, or does it only have to “ring true”?

### **The Miracle of Language**

From the earliest times people have sensed that “the gift of language” is a miraculous difference between humans and animals. When storytellers want to personify an animal, the first thing they do is to give the animal human speech. This is what the Greek Aesop, the Frenchman LaFontaine, and the Persian Bidpai did in their fables, what Walt Disney did in his cartoons, and what Richard Scarry and Dr. Seuss did in their stories for children.

Nearly every culture has a story explaining the creation and in each of these stories speech plays a part. In some stories it figures as a gift from the gods, while in others it is just there as a tool to be used. As humans who think in language, it is hard for us to conceive of existence without speech. Nor can we imagine how something so complex as the creation of the world and all that is in it could be accomplished without the benefit of verbal communication. As the King James Version of the Bible says, “In the beginning was the Word.” Fourteen out of the first thirty-one verses in Genesis are about speech acts: “God said,” “God called,” “God blessed,” “God commanded,” etc. And in Chapter Two when God brought the animals to Adam for naming, this speech act symbolically gave Adam control and dominance over the earth and the animals in it.

To have language is to be human and to be human is to have language. But still this does not tell us where language came from. The truth is that nobody knows, but within recent years, scholars have been pursuing several different paths which yield insights into this question, which might be compared to the old riddle: “Which came first, the chicken or the egg?”

### **The Speech Organs**

Archaeologists have put together enough skeletons of prehistoric people to theorize that Neanderthals did not speak in the same way that humans speak today because the shape of their oral cavities and the placement of their larynxes and esophagi were such that their production of sounds would have been limited

compared to ours. They could not have made the common /a/, /i/, and /u/ vowel sounds and probably not both nasal and non-nasal sounds.

Comparing today's human bodies with the remains of prehistoric ones shows us that our bodies have evolved to accommodate the sophisticated speech we now employ. Our upright position, which gives us a clearer passage for air as well as the possibility of making more sound distinctions, is better for speaking but worse for eating. The throat's position and shape in relation to the skull is such that food can easily be sucked into the windpipe, causing choking. Because humans stand upright, gravity helps to draw their food down. The danger of choking has made humans take extra precautions. Sitting down to eat is one of the few customs practiced by all human groups on earth. Animals can eat while they are walking or even running because their throats are not as complicated as are human throats. This means that they do not have the problem of choking, but neither do they have the sophisticated machinery for vocalization that humans have.

A common belief used to be that all of the organs used in speech production were basically for some other purpose, such as breathing or eating. Being able to speak was serendipity. But today, speech pathologists refute this. The whole purpose of the velum at the back of the mouth is to close off the nasal passages. This is used primarily for speech, although it also enables people to breathe through their mouths, as when they swim or smoke. Another part of the mouth that has evolved to facilitate speech is the tongue, whose muscles are far too specialized to be designed just for mastication. No other part of the body can flatten itself out or make itself long and pointed or thick and arched. And no other organ touches in rapid succession specified points only fractions of centimeters away from each other as the tongue must do when it makes such fine distinctions as required by the trilled /r/ sound or the /s/ sound. For example, in trying to say the word *sip*, if a speaker's tongue goes too far forward the person will lisp and say *thip*. If the tongue goes forward just enough to touch the tooth ridge the person will say *tip*. Only if the tongue comes very close to – but does not touch – the tooth ridge will the person successfully say *sip*. The tongue must leave just a small space for the air to hiss through. If the tip of the tongue leaves too big a space, then the person will say *yip*; and if it misses even more, then the person will say *ship*.

The amazing thing is not only that the tip of the tongue can be shaped to make these fine distinctions, but also that it has the sensitivity to recognize when it is in the right or the wrong place and to move accordingly. When people are drunk, their speech is slurred not because they have a "thick tongue," but because throughout their body reactions are slower and the feedback from the tongue is not as quick or as accurate. A person who is drunk speaks with the tongue in approximate, rather than exact, position.

Of course there is also gesture language, which some scientists believe was used by primitive people, but certainly not with the precision that today's deaf speakers employ. And actually, the mastery of today's complex sign language requires greater, rather than less, intellect to manage. Sign language is also slower than speech, and it requires people to be face-to-face, concentrating only on the message.

Some linguists have spent years of their lives – even going so far as adopting an animal, such as a chimpanzee, and raising it in their home – in hopes of teaching the animal to speak. No one has succeeded in teaching animals to verbalize, i.e. to “speak” basic words, although they have been able to teach some animals to respond and pick out items that represent specific concepts. People have also been able to teach canaries and parrots to say certain “words,” but again not in the way of having a conversation.

Today, there are mainly two opposing viewpoints about language acquisition. One theory is called the *innatist* hypothesis, while the other one is the *behaviorist*, or *stimulus-response* hypothesis. An oversimplified explanation of the behaviorist hypothesis is that at birth the brain is an empty slate waiting to be written on. The newborn infant immediately begins to learn about language from the interactions of surrounding humans. B. F. Skinner's work is based on this behaviorist hypothesis.

The innatist hypothesis says that the human brain is programmed to learn the kind of language that humans use. Noam Chomsky and others have made a good case for this view. Evidence includes the fact that all normal children who are exposed to language learn to speak at approximately the same age, regardless of differences in their native intelligence. And regardless of the language they are learning, they follow approximately the same pattern in developing their speech. They first speak one-word sentences such as “Dada,” “Drink,” or “Go.” In their next stage of development, they speak such two-word sentences as “Dada come,” “Me drink,” or “Mama go.” In the third stage of development, they might increase their sentences to such statements as “Dada come home,” “Me drink water,” and “Mama go bye-bye.”

These were English examples, but linguists have found that children go through similar developmental states when they are learning Japanese, Swahili, German, or any other language. This kind of incomplete speech is called the telegraphic stage because it sounds like a telegram in which the sender saved money by leaving out all the unimportant words. Notice how similar it is to the language sometimes used in popular fiction or comics, as for example when Tarzan says, “Me Tarzan, you Jane!” or an Indian says to a white settler, “Me hungry – you give food!” Authors use language in this way as a literary device to indicate that a speaker is still in the learning stages of English and is using a kind of simplified or pidgin English. But such a literary representation is partly inaccurate because when most adults learn a second language, at least through



formal study, they do not go through the same developmental stages as do children who are acquiring their first language.

Linguists and psychologists are very interested in comparing initial and second-language learning. One of the questions that intrigues them about first language learning is why children's language is so different from that of the adults who serve as models for the children. Adult speakers decline their verbs and use such function words as suffixes, articles, and auxiliaries, but children do not. How can the child know enough to ignore the function words (i.e. those that have grammatical significance) and to pick out and use the more important content words (that is, the nouns, verbs, and modifiers)? And how can the child eventually work up to what we call grammatical English when much of what he or she hears, especially from other children, is ungrammatical?

People can begin to learn a new language at any time in their lives, but not with the same facility that it is learned in early childhood. Often when families move to a country in which a different language is spoken, the children will learn the new language much faster than the adults. In situations like this, it is not uncommon to see young children acting as interpreters for their parents. And it is true that after the age of 12 a speaker will not learn a new language without having at least a slight accent. These things seem to support the idea that even if there is linguistic programming in the brain, it needs to be triggered at the appropriate time or else development suffers.

### **A Universal Theory of Humor**

For decades, humor scholars have been arguing with each other about which humor theory is correct, assuming that one theory is the right one, and that this particular theory will eventually rule as the "Universal Theory of Humor" among current humor researchers. However, there is no consensus as to which theory should emerge as the "Universal Theory." The three theories that are currently at the forefront are the Relief Theory, the Superiority Theory, and the Incongruity Resolution theory. However, many of today's humor scholars acknowledge that when they look at a particular instance of humor, they find themselves relying on all three theories because each theory provides its own spin or focus, but they usually select one of the three as the most important for explaining an incident.

Scholars who champion Relief Theory see laughter and mirth as resulting from the release of nervous energy. They see humor as a way of overcoming sociocultural inhibitions and revealing suppressed desires. One piece of their evidence is that when a child is being tickled, the child's laughter begins before the tickling actually occurs. This apprehensive laughter is due to a build-up of tension as the tickler "strikes." Robert Spencer and others believe that laughter is an "economical phenomenon," and that its function is to release "psychic energy."

Adherence to the Superiority Theory of humor goes all the way back to Plato and Aristotle, and to Thomas Hobbes in his *Leviathan*. The Superiority Theory claims that people laugh about the misfortunes of others; in German, this is called Schadenfreude Humor. They say that a person sees another person's misfortunes and shortcomings as evidence of his own superiority. Socrates and Plato consider "ridiculous" people to be those who display self-ignorance, while Aristotle said that the targets of laughter are inferior or ugly people because they make ordinary people feel joy at being superior to them.

Scholars who focus on the Incongruity Resolution Theory say that humor does not result from the incongruity itself, but rather from the resolution of the incongruity (i.e. putting the objects in question into their proper alignment). In his *Thoughts on Laughter* (1725), Francis Hutcheson wrote that laughter is a response to the perception of incongruity. Arthur Schopenhauer wrote that the perceived incongruity is between a concept and the real object it represents. Hegel had a similar view as he saw the concept as an "appearance" and thought that laughter negates that appearance. The first person to formulate Incongruity Resolution Theory was the Scottish poet Beattie (James Beattie, *Essays*, Edinburgh and London: William Creech, 1776).

Immanuel Kant was suggesting a form of Incongruity Theory Resolution when he proposed that the comic is "the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing." Henri Bergson said something similar when he described humor as mapping the "living" onto the "mechanical." John Morreall (*Taking Laughter Seriously*, 1983) presents humor as two unrelated things being simultaneously juxtaposed, while Robert Latta focuses on the "cognitive shift" created by the sudden solution to some kind of problem (*The Basic Humor Process: A Cognitive-Shift Theory and the Case against Incongruity*, 1998). But Latta and Brian Boyd (*Laughter and Literature*, 2004) say that this cognitive shift has to be sudden and unexpected. Arthur Koestler (*The Act of Creation*, 1964) argues that humor exists whenever two different frames of reference are established and there is a collision between the two.

I. M. Suslov ("Computer Model of 'A Sense of Humour'" in *Realization in Neural Networks*, 1992) feels that a sense of humor will inevitably develop in the course of human evolution because its biological function relates to the quickening of the understanding of processed information in an effective use of brain resources. His theory puts linguistic or verbal humor, visual humor (caricature or clown performance), and physical humor (tickling, etc.) on the same footing. According to Suslov's theory, the development of a sense of humor for humans was at first purely biological, but then it later developed its social functions. As evidence of the first part of this claim, he points out that monkeys, and even rats, possess a sense of humor.

Geoffrey Miller (*The Mating Mind*, 2001) suggests that the development of a sense of humor was important in sexual selection. He argues that in early humans, humor was an indicator of other traits that were of survival value,

such as human intelligence. Alleen remembers calling home from college to tell her mother that she had met a boy in her French class that she was getting serious with. Her mother automatically told her that she wasn't "old enough to be getting serious with anyone!" Alleen can still reproduce the intonation that she used to respond: "But Mother – he laughs at my jokes!"

Matthew Hurley, Daniel Dennet, and Reginald Adams (*Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*, 2011) argue that humor evolved as a way for the brain to find mistakes in belief structures. The human brain is able to detect mistaken reasoning by considering and contrasting many different alternatives. Like dreams, humor presents different scenarios from which we can later consciously select which ones are best for us. In that way, humor can be an important survival trait.

Other theories of humor are less universal, and therefore less philosophical, because they are closely tied to one or more particular discipline(s). A leading theory in this category is Victor Raskin's Script-Based Semantic Theory of Humor (*Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*, 1985). This is a variant of Incongruity Resolution Theory that provides excellent insights into linguistic humor, whether written or spoken. It is an excellent tool for analyzing riddles and jokes that conclude with a punch-line. This theory has two conditions. First, the text of the set-up and the text of the punch-line must be compatible (fully or in part) with two semantic scripts. And second, the two scripts must be opposite. Humor happens when the punch-line at the end of the joke is triggered, causing the audience to quickly shift its understanding from the primary (mundane) script to the secondary (opposing) script. There are many types of script opposition, including actual vs. non-actual, normal vs. abnormal, possible vs. impossible, good vs. bad, life vs. death, money vs. no money, high status vs. low status, mundane vs. obscene, etc. Finally, there must be a clever way of envisioning the two scripts making pseudo-sense together.

In order to deal with larger genres of verbal humor, Victor Raskin and Salvatore Attardo developed the General Theory of Verbal Humor ("Script Theory Revis(it)ed: Joke Similarity and Joke Representation Model," *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research*, 1991). This revised theory is able to deal with all verbal humor ranging from spontaneous one-liners to funny stories to novels and trilogies in literature. According to this General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH), there are six things that need to be considered:

1. Script Opposition (e.g. mundane vs. scatological)
2. Logical Mechanism (what it is that connects the different scripts)
3. Situation (the objects, activities, instruments and props that are needed to tell the story)
4. Target (the stereotypes of ethnic groups, professions, etc. of the "butt" of the joke)

5. Narrative Strategy (the sub-genre or the genre – simple narrative, dialogue, riddle, etc.)
6. Language (the exact wording, placement of words and phrases, and timing).

### **Ambiguity and Vagueness in Language**

Throughout this book, ambiguous statements have been quoted in practically every section. This is because they are among the most common kinds of language play. But here, where we are concentrating on meaning, it might be well to make a few observations about the nature of ambiguity. First, there is a difference between a statement being vague and a statement being ambiguous. When a statement is vague, the listener or reader is confused and unsure of any meaning. But when a statement is ambiguous, two or more distinct interpretations are suggested. For example, the last part of the sentence, “The reporter refused to attend any more dull teachers’ meetings,” is ambiguous. It could be either the teachers who are dull or the meetings which are dull. A vague rendition of the same communication might be something like “Because of dullness, boredom, obstinacy, and a lack of comradery, the reporter refused to attend.” In this vague sentence the readers’ thought might be triggered to go in several different directions, asking such questions as: “Who was dull? Who was bored? Who was obstinate? Whose personalities are involved?” and even, “What is it that the reporter refused to attend?”

Ambiguity can be either intentional or unintentional. In writing, this can be either a good thing or a bad thing. If we are doing speed-reading, trying to hurry along and get some concrete information, we do not want to bother with ambiguity. If a recipe, or the directions for hooking up a television antenna, are written in such a way that readers get multiple meanings, the result might be disastrous. But intentional ambiguity serves many purposes. Satire, sarcasm, allusion, simile, and metaphor – in fact, the many kinds of language play treated in literature and in creative writing classes – are possible because the human mind can cope with ambiguity.

We enjoy reading or listening to something and probing for a second, a third, or even a fourth level of meaning. It is partially because we need time for this kind of thinking and probing that it takes us longer to read the same number of words in poetry and in great literature than in the daily news accounts.

Years ago, in the second week of the Fall semester when Don was teaching a new group of students from Japan at the University of Michigan’s English Language Institute, on the second day of class, one of the young men arrived about fifteen minutes late. He was covered with sweat, his hair was tangled, his face was flushed, and his book bag was hanging open. Of course, Don asked if

everything was okay. It took the student a while to explain that just as he got almost to campus, he saw a big sign posted right in the middle of the highway which clearly said:

NO  
U  
TURN.

This was only the young man's second week in the United States, and it was the first day that he had driven a car to the campus. When he saw this sign, he thought it was telling him to turn around, which he quickly did and then found himself driving against traffic. He heard cars honking, then a siren, and very soon a police officer was waving at him. Of course he stopped, and there in the middle of a highway leading into the university campus, he and the policeman had an inter-cultural exchange.

Fortunately, there was no accident and the student came away with only a warning, but still he was so frustrated that the whole class got involved. One person tried to explain to our frustrated student that he had misread the sign. He confidently gave the explanation that "English doesn't have words that are only one-letter long!" Someone else argued, "Yes it does – look at *I* as in "I did it!" This of course inspired the observation that "If *I* is one-letter long, then it's perfectly obvious that *you* or *U* should also be one-letter long because the two words are sort of "a matched set."

Don had to jump in and compliment the students for thinking about this whole situation and for coming up with some good examples, but at the same time he explained that natural languages, which have developed over centuries and in many different places at the same time, are not totally systematic. However, those linguists who study one particular language, and go looking for patterns and similarities within that language, are often amazed at how much "system" they find inside a language, and even in any one dialect of a language.

It is because of these kinds of patterns that philosophers and linguists can draw conclusions about how the human mind works by watching how people react to the following set of jokes that one of our neighbors recently sent to us. There's nothing funny about the jokes, unless the listener or reader's mind is clever enough to first interpret the sentences with their most basic or first meaning, and then to almost immediately grasp the other meaning based on one of the other terms having an alternate meaning. As you read these jokes, think of the basic meaning and then of the alternate meaning. Can you see why, for a student just learning English, it would be a challenge to spot the term with the double meaning, and then to quickly see the difference between the basic and the alternate meaning?

1. Nineteen Newfies go to the movies. The ticket lady asks, "Why so many of you?" Buddy replies, "The advertisement said 18 or over."
2. My daughter wanted a pet spider for her birthday, so I went to our local pet shop and they were \$70. Forget it, I thought, I can get one cheaper off the web.
3. I was at an ATM yesterday. A little old lady asked if I could check her balance, so I pushed her over.
4. Statistically, six out of seven dwarfs are not Happy.
5. My neighbor knocked on my door at 2:30 am. Can you believe that! 2:30 am? Luckily for him, I was still up playing my bagpipes.
6. An East Indian fellow has moved in next door. He has traveled the world, has swum with sharks. Has wrestled bears and climbed the highest mountain. It came as no surprise to learn his name was Bindair Dundat.

### A Philosophical Joke about a Chicken

The popular riddle of "Why did the chicken cross the road?" is funny only because it isn't funny. Even pre-school children know the mundane answer and when they are asked, "Why did the chicken cross the road?" they happily shout out, "To get to the other side!"

Because this is such an old and well-known riddle, Americans often create parodies that are extensions of the joke. The newly devised answers are ascribed to well-known people and the humor comes from how quickly the listener can figure out connections between the personalities or the actions of the celebrities who are supposedly providing their own responses to the question of "Why did the chicken cross the road?" Here are some examples:

#### Why Did the Chicken Cross the Road? – Part I

1. **Did the chicken really cross the road, or did the road move beneath the chicken?** Ascribed to Albert Einstein, the world's greatest physicist who figured out the theory of relativity.
2. **I have just released *eChicken 2016* which will not only cross roads, but will lay eggs, file your important documents and balance your check-book.** Ascribed to Bill Gates, who with Paul Allen founded the Microsoft Corporation and is now among the richest men in the world.
3. **I invented the chicken.** Ascribed to Al Gore who was once the US Vice President. When he later campaigned for the Presidency, he hinted that he should get credit for inventing the Internet.
4. **To die in the rain alone.** Ascribed to Ernest Hemingway, an influential American author who committed suicide in 1961. His understated style, as in *A Farewell to Arms* and *The Old Man and the Sea*, was a major influence on later American authors.

5. **Did I miss one?** Ascribed to Colonel Sanders who devised the recipe and established the restaurant chain known as *Kentucky Fried Chicken*.
6. **I crossed the road with the chicken.** Ascribed to Brian Williams, a television newscaster who lost an important job when he said he was on a military plane that received enemy fire. Actually, he was an observer flying on a plane that was following the attacked airplane.
7. **Well, I understand that the chicken is having problems, which is why he wants to cross the road so badly. I'm going to give this chicken a NEW CAR so he can just drive across the road.** Ascribed to television celebrity Oprah Winfrey who hosts a problem-solving talk-show and sometimes provides surprise gifts for people in the audience.

### Why Did the Chicken Cross the Road? – Part II

The following set of “Why Did the Chicken Cross the Road” jokes all relate to the 2016 Presidential election in the United States, when in an upset victory Donald Trump was chosen to be the US President. Here are the names and a brief description of the individuals whose names were fitted into the blank spaces when punsters created the new jokes. See if you can match one of the names given below to the appropriate joke statement, based on the brief descriptions of the following prominent American politicians or media celebrities.

#### The Names

- A. **George W. Bush** was the US President between 2004 and 2012 and was known for demanding loyalty to the US from other countries.
- B. **Ben Carson** is a retired neuro-surgeon, who is black, and who since his retirement has shown an interest in politics.
- C. **Hillary Clinton** is the former First Lady who ran for the Presidency in 2016 and was often criticized for how she had handled her emails when she was Secretary of State.
- D. **Sarah Palin** is the former Governor of Alaska who unsuccessfully ran for Vice President with John McCain. She is known for her “folksy” style of speaking.
- E. **Rand Paul** is a senator from Kentucky, who believes government should play a very small part in people's lives.
- F. **Dr. Phil** is a personal psychological counselor and author who has a televised show in which he works with troubled couples or individuals.
- G. **Al Sharpton** is a black activist and politician.
- H. **Donald Trump** is the US President, who during his campaign in 2016 “promised” to build a wall between Mexico and the United States and to have Mexico pay for it. Most Americans were skeptical, while Mexicans were offended.



### The Joke Statements

1. "It's none of our business why the chicken crossed the road." Playfully ascribed to \_\_\_\_\_.
2. "We will build a big wall to keep the chickens from crossing the road, and we will make the chickens pay for it." Playfully ascribed to \_\_\_\_\_.
3. "This isn't brain surgery," playfully ascribed to \_\_\_\_\_.
4. "What difference, at this point, does it make why the chicken crossed the road." Playfully ascribed to \_\_\_\_\_.
5. "Because, gosh-darn it, he's a maverick!" Playfully ascribed to \_\_\_\_\_.
6. "We don't really care why the chicken crossed the road. We just want to know if the chicken is on our side of the road or not. The chicken is either with us or against us." Playfully ascribed to \_\_\_\_\_.
7. "Why are all the chickens white?" Playfully ascribed to \_\_\_\_\_.
8. "The problem we have here is that this chicken won't realize that he must first deal with the problem on this side of the road before he goes after the problem on the other side of the road.

**Answers:** 1. Rand Paul, 2. Donald Trump, 3. Ben Carson, 4. Hillary Clinton, 5. Sarah Palin, 6. George W. Bush, 7. Al Sharpton, 8. Dr. Phil.

### What Philosophers Say about Humor

If we accept the broad definition of philosophy as "The study of general and fundamental life problems concerning such matters as Aesthetics, Epistemology, Ethics, Logic, Metaphysics, Political Philosophy, and the Philosophies of Language, Mind, Religion, and Science," then in some ways this entire book is an exploration of philosophical matters. Other support for that idea is that today's university students can earn Ph.D. (Doctor of Philosophy) degrees in each of the subject matters that we are treating in the various chapters.

Here are brief paragraphs identifying several of the true "pioneers" in the study of philosophy and humor.

**Plato** (424–348 BCE) was the classical Greek philosopher who conflated what we now call humor with laughter. He looked mainly at the laughter of ridicule and viewed it as an emotion in itself, rather than as evidence of something more complex. It therefore fell under his general objection to emotions, which can "override rationality and self-control."

**Aristotle** (384–322 BCE) was the Greek tutor to Alexander the Great. He thought that comedy results from people who are somehow inferior. They do not cause pain, but are like a mistake in being unseemly or distorted. He nevertheless gave advice on how to make people laugh. He advised setting up an expectation and then “jolting” the audience with something different.

**Cicero** (Born in 106 BCE) was a Roman orator and author. He wrote that the most common joke is when we expect one thing and something else happens. Our disappointed expectation is what makes us laugh. But when something ambiguous is thrown in, listeners have to stop and figure out the joke, which heightens its effects.

**Seneca** (4 BCE–AD 65) was the Roman philosopher who served as an advisor to Nero. He counseled “Bear yourself with wit, lest you be regarded as sour or despised as dull,” adding that “Those who lack playfulness are sinful” and that those who never say anything to make you smile, and who are grumpy, are “rough and boorish.”

Of course there were people thinking and talking about philosophy and humor over the next several centuries, but we have hardly any written accounts of what these philosophers were thinking and saying about humor. However, there are written records in the Bible – both the Old and the New Testaments – and by the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Renaissance, philosophers were again investigating various concepts of humor related to philosophy, as seen in these additional brief summaries.

**St. Thomas Aquinas** (AD 1225–1274), a well-known Italian priest, called a happy person a “eutrapelos,” and defined the term as “a pleasant person with a happy cast of mind who gives his words and deeds a cheerful turn.”

**René Descartes** (AD 1595–1650) was the French philosopher who wrote, “I am thinking, therefore I exist.” He said that people laugh at those who are inferior to them. He explained that the laugh is an obvious defect, because it is satisfying to see others held in lower esteem than ourselves.

**Immanuel Kant** (1724–1804) was an East Prussian philosopher who wrote that “Laughter is an affectation arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.” Note that in a way, this is the exact opposite of how later scholars described the punch-line of a joke as an epiphany.

**William Spencer** (1769–1834) was a British philosopher and poet who wrote that we laugh when our minds are surprised by recognizing similarities between great and small things. He called it a “descending incongruity.”

**William Hazlitt** (1778–1830) was the British philosopher who observed that “Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps; for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are and what they ought to be. We weep at what thwarts or exceeds our desires in serious matters; we laugh at what only disappoints our expectations in trifles.”

**Søren Kierkegaard** (1813–1855) was a Danish philosopher who wrote that the tragic vision sees the contradiction and *sees no way out*, while the comic vision faces the same contradiction but *sees a way out*. Kierkegaard felt that in many situations, “the comic perspective can be more imaginative, more insightful, and wiser than the tragic perspective.”

**Friedrich Nietzsche** (1844–1900) was the German philosopher who said: “That which does not kill us makes us stronger.” He also said, “He who has a *why* to live can bear almost any *how*.” And still another of his philosophical statements was “In individuals, insanity is rare; but in groups, parties, nations and epochs, it is the rule.”

**Franz Kafka** (1883–1924) was an Austrian philosopher who had been raised in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Kafka proposed that youth is happy because it has the ability to see beauty. He optimistically claimed that anybody who keeps the ability to see beauty never grows old. Gregor Samsa is the ambivalent protagonist in Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*. He is an excellent representation of the “Incongruity and Incongruity Resolution” theory of humor, as Gregor exhibits some of the qualities of a human and some of the qualities of a cockroach.

**Henri Bergson** (1859–1941) was a French philosopher. Bergson claimed that when we suppress our *élan vital* and manage our lives with logic, “we act in rigid, mechanical ways, treating new experiences merely as repetitions of previous ones.” He concluded that laughter comes from the surprise of suddenly seeing “the mechanical encrusted on the living.” He wasn’t exactly foretelling the future, but it makes us wonder if he was thinking about the way that some of today’s humor centers around competition between humans, computers, and androids.

**Jean-Paul Sartre** (1905–1980) was the French Existentialist philosopher who said, “Man is condemned to be free, because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does.”

**Albert Camus** (1913–1960) was another French philosopher. He felt that it is the job of thinking people not to be on the side of executioners.

### Points of Departure

1. Choose one of the philosophers in the above list and find out more information to bring back to your fellow students. You could do this either in a written form or just as notes that you could use to make an oral report to your class.

2. What do philosophers say about any of the following subjects? If you were a great philosopher, what would you say about these topics?
  - Ambiguity
  - Humor
  - Satire
  - Irony
  - Paradox.
  
3. The **Philosoraptor** (a meme) asks many unanswerable questions. Here are thirteen of his quotes. See if you can answer any of them without sarcasm. How about with sarcasm?
  1. Is there another word for synonym?
  2. If a robot does “the robot” could it still be called “the robot” ... or just ... dancing?
  3. If anything is possible ... Is it possible for something to be impossible?
  4. Is a fly without wings ... called a walk?
  5. If you stab a man during an argument ... will he finally get the point?
  6. What would happen ... if Pinocchio said his nose would grow?
  7. Is it true that cannibals don’t eat clowns ... because they taste funny?
  8. Why do noses run ... and feet smell?
  9. If there is an undertaker ... is there an uppertaker?
  10. If they squeeze olives to get olive oil ... what do they squeeze to get baby oil?
  11. If you’re not supposed to talk to strangers ... then how do I make friends?
  12. A man with one watch knows what time it is ... but a man with two watches is never quite sure.
  13. I just killed the older version of myself. Is that murder, or suicide?
  
4. The Monty Python movies deal with such significant philosophical questions as *The Meaning of Life*, the search for *The Holy Grail*. *Monty Python’s The Life of Brian* is a parody of the life of Christ. Is philosophy such a serious subject that it shouldn’t be treated lightly, or can the parodies give deeper insights into philosophical issues?

In the educational system of the United States, Physical Education is known as *Phys Ed*, *PE*, *Gym*, or *Gym class*, while in other countries it might be called *Physical Training* or *PT*. It is a course designed to exercise the human body and to encourage physical exercise, play, sports, dance, martial arts, and other types of body movement, along with positive attitudes toward the idea of taking care of one's body. Some of the body movements that students learn and practice are in large coordinated groups with everyone doing the same thing at the same time. But in sports and games, the body movement is both cooperative (with other members of your own team) and competitive (against members of an opposing team). Physical, mental, social, and emotional training are promoted in most Physical Education programs so that such classes provide excellent training for public performance, in general, and physical humor in particular. Of course much communication is done through our mouths (talking), our ears (listening), our eyes (reading or watching), and our hands (writing, signing, or clapping), but people also communicate through many other kinds of body language. A wonderful example of how people can "talk" mainly with their hands, but also with help from their faces and the rest of their bodies, is American Sign Language as used by deaf people. When they sign to each other, they use their fingers, hands, and arms, but they also use their eyes and the rest of their bodies. Many hearing people also learn sign language so that they can communicate with deaf people. For example, in American sign language, every letter of the alphabet in finger-spelling has a kind of logic – it looks like a letter of the alphabet, or is part of a sequence. Other kinds of iconicity, which are an aid to memory rather than an example of male chauvinism, include the practice of referring to male relatives with the hands held higher than they are for female relatives. The words "father," "grandfather," "great-grandfather," and "great-great-grandfather" are signed from the forehead with one arc, two arcs, three arcs, and four arcs respectively, while the words for "mother," "grandmother," "great-grandmother," and "great-great-grandmother" are signed from the chin with one arc, two arcs, three arcs, and four arcs respectively. Sentences in the future tense are signed further forward, while sentences in the past tense are signed further back.

Linguist Guiselinde Kuipers says that laughing or promoting laughter through humor or wit is an invitation for people to come closer. Laughter decreases social distance, which probably explains why normal people don't "get the giggles" or break out laughing when they are alone. However, people do smile when they are reading, or even when they are having private thoughts. It is because laughter is more "contagious" than smiling that in the old days of radio, comedy performers often had a laughter track playing in the background. It is also why today most of the late-night comedians now have audiences and/or orchestra members or other "helpers" on stage who can laugh with them and thereby help to increase the "humor bond" between the performer and the audience.

James Agee classifies the laughter of screen comedians into four categories: the titter, the yowl, the belly laugh, and the boffo. Agee sees the range of laughter going from the inner and inaudible laugh (the simper or smirk) to the loud and unrestrained howl, yowl, shriek, and finally what he calls the "Olympian laugh." We may laugh because we are shocked, or embarrassed. There is a "she-laughed-so-I-laughed-too" laugh, and even the "he-laughed-so-I-didn't laugh." Del Kehl, a literature professor at our university, has placed laughter into thirteen categories which go in ascending order as follows: simper, smirk, snicker, titter, giggle, chuckle, a simple laugh, cackle, cachinnation, chortle, belly laugh, horse laugh, Olympian or Homeric laugh, guffaw, boff or boffo, crack-up, roar, yowl, howl, bellow, hoot, and shriek.

Robert Provine says that most laughter is not a response to jokes or other formal attempts at humor. Salvatore Attardo adds that laughter may be caused by all sorts of non-humorous stimuli such as tickling, laughing gas, or embarrassment, and can be triggered by watching and hearing other people laugh. Jodi Eisterhold discusses the "principle of least disruption" which, at least in groups, enjoins speakers to return to a serious mode as soon as possible. Smiling and laughter can be interpreted differently in different cultures. Gary Alan Fine has explained that a smile in one society may portray friendliness, in another embarrassment, while in still another it may be a warning of hostilities and attack if tension is not reduced.

In one of his performances, black comedian Dave Chappelle tells about being on a hijacked airplane when he sees another black male and they do a thumbs-up to each other. This was a way for the two of them to communicate that they understood the situation and were acknowledging the idea that terrorists don't take black hostages.

Because smiles can sometimes evolve into laughs, and laughs can taper off into smiles, some people think that laughter is merely a form of exaggerated smiling. However, smiles are more likely to express feelings of satisfaction or goodwill, while laughter comes from surprise or a recognition of an incongruity. Furthermore, laughter is basically a public event, while smiling is

basically a private event. Anthony Chapman did a study in which he compared the actions of a group of children who knew they were being observed with a group who did not know they were being observed. The children who knew they were being watched laughed four times as often as did those in the other group. However, they smiled only half as much. Chapman concluded not only that laughter can be good or bad, depending on the situation, but also that humor is both the cause for laughter, and the result of laughter, which is why humor and laughter are so closely associated.

Willibald Ruch says that when individuals genuinely enjoy humor, they show the facial configuration named the *Duchenne display*, which refers to the joint contraction of the *zygomatic major* and the *orbicularis oculi* muscles (pulling the lip corners backwards and upwards and raising the cheeks), causing eye wrinkles. But Ruch also says that smiles do *not* always reflect genuine enjoyment. Because they are easier to fake than are laughs, smiles are sometimes used to mask negative emotions, or even to pretend enjoyment when what is actually being felt is sadness, anger, or embarrassment. And while the laughter of normal people is usually associated with mirth and joy, some perpetrators of violent acts have been known to exhibit menacing smiles, or to laugh demonically.

The paradoxes of laughter have been addressed by many laughter scholars, including Jacob Levine who says that no pattern of human behavior is so full of paradoxes as laughter. People might laugh for bonding or distancing from someone, from anxiety or relief, from anger or affection, or from joy or frustration. Conditions that can evoke laughter include shyness, triumph, surprise, tickling, a funny story, an incongruous situation, a sense of well-being, or even a desire to conceal one's inner thoughts. Also, people who laugh from being tickled are not necessarily put in a more receptive mood for enjoying the humor in jokes. This is because laughing from being tickled occurs in a part of the brain different from where laughter that is intellectually stimulated occurs. Furthermore, people cannot tickle themselves because the cerebellum in the lower back of the brain sends an interfering message to the part of the brain that controls laughter.

Laughter and smiling have mixed benefits, but we know that laughter can act as a natural painkiller and can assist with breathing and thereby decrease stress. Laughter also can aid sleep and thereby decrease stress. It helps overweight people lose weight and makes people look younger, so go ahead and laugh.

Because sometimes it is easier to demonstrate actions than it is to describe them, we are listing several actions here and asking you to think about them. Perhaps you can work in small groups and then have the best model from your group share a couple of the examples with the class and tell whether the ones



you choose to share are usually a positive or usually a negative example and whether they are more likely to be used by males or females, or equally by both genders. Don't worry if your class does not manage to recreate all of the listed actions and sounds. The point is just to demonstrate how many of these "signals" most of us have learned without ever having been formally taught.

Group 1. Frown, giggle, grimace, grin, guffaw, laugh, scowl, smile, smirk, or snarl.

Group 2. Blink, flutter eyelashes, grit teeth, hold nose, nod head, or play the world's smallest violin sarcastically.

Group 3. Raise eyebrows, roll eyes sarcastically, roll shoulders in disbelief, roll shoulders in a sexy fashion, shake head, stick out tongue, wink, wrinkle nose, or yawn.

Group 4. Applaud in American Sign Language, cross fingers, give the finger, hold hands, point, thumb a ride, thumbs down, thumbs up, twiddle thumbs.

Group 5. Fist bump, high five, low five, hip bump, finger explosion.

Group 6. Cross legs, sit on a park bench, sit on a bus seat, slap your knee while laughing.

Group 7. Communicate these decisions as a baseball referee might: fair ball, foul ball, home run, strike, and safe.

Group 8. Communicate these decisions as a basketball referee might: basket doesn't count, a blocking foul, held ball, an in-bounce, moving screen, offensive foul, out of bounds, time out.

Group 9. Communicate these decisions as a football referee might: clipping, face mask, illegal celebration, illegal procedure, late hit, offside, pass interference, roughing the kicker, roughing the passer, a safety, a touchdown, unnecessary roughness.

Of course some of our body language is unintentional. For example, people usually cannot make themselves blush, and they may not be aware of what they are doing when they blink, cower, cringe, shudder, tremble, twist their hair, or weep. And sometimes their actions are more obvious to other people than to themselves, as when someone is described as being on their toes, being stuck-up, being up in arms, keeping a stiff upper lip, or putting their foot in their mouth.

Sometimes we have expressions that we don't have words for. When these colloquial expressions are written down they are called "paralanguage" because they are not examples of words in "real language." See if you can figure out the following examples of paralanguage: What you say to a horse (lateral click), hiss, ask "huh?", raspberry or Bronx cheer, shush, swearing (\*&^(%\$\*@!), tsk tsk, uchhhhhh!, uh huh (yes), uh uh (no – with a glottal sound), wolf whistle, yuchhhhhhhh!

### Good Sports and Language Play

Team sports are a big part of American life, and in nearly all cases – starting with Little League softball or football for young boys, and with dancing and cheerleading for young girls – there are more spectators than players. The spectators amuse themselves by cheering for their favorite players and for outstanding moves. They also boo and hiss when they see incidents of poor sportsmanship. The common belief is that by getting our children into athletics at an early age, we are helping them with their physical health and at the same time teaching them codes of fair play. Good teachers also hope to teach children kindness and consideration as they model for students the way to be encouraging, rather than to make fun of students who are less skilled

While most people agree on these noble goals, not everyone is sure that the adults of the world have mastered such characteristics, as demonstrated by a joke that we recently heard. A concerned Little League coach was speaking harshly to a young baseball player:

Do you know that if the referee calls you out, you're out?  
Do you know not to argue with the referee?  
Do you know not to hurt other people?  
Do you know how to take turns?

When the young boy nods his head and meekly answers “Yes” to all the coach’s questions, the coach says, “Good! Now go and teach these things to your grandfather.”

Besides this kind of individual humor that grows out of the many hours that people sit and watch both amateur, school, and professional football, baseball, basketball, hockey, soccer, tennis, swimming, and other special games such as the Olympics or international tournaments, the sponsors exert themselves to provide opportunities for humor. One of the ways teams do this is by providing team mascots. Sometimes, these mascots are made to appear bigger than life because of their distinctive clothing and built-up shoes. Their humor is made up mostly of pantomime and full-body actions, and like circus clowns, they give audience members something to look at during down-times before and after the games, and during intermissions. They figure out ways to interact with the cheerleaders and the spectators as they pose for photos, sign autographs, pass out treats to children, and do acrobatic tricks. With professional and college teams, probably their most important role is providing an image for uniforms, advertisements, sweatshirts, billboards, and whatever paraphernalia owners, players, and advertisers can create, including stuffed dolls and other toy versions of the mascot.

However, a difference between clowns and mascots is that many of the mascots have their faces covered up. The situation is complicated by the fact that

they are in a place where everyone else is moving with speed and agility. As they try to keep up, they sometimes trip on the stadium stairs or on equipment that has been left lying on the ground below their line of vision. Or they might run into (or get run into) by cheerleaders, officials, and athletes. Curious children and sometimes adults (who might be either drunk or just mean-spirited) reach out to hit or push the mascot to see what happens. If you look online under such headings as “Mascot Mishaps” or “Funny Mascot Bloopers,” you will get an idea of different kinds of accidents.

And sometimes, it isn’t the fault of spectators, but instead the poor judgment by whoever is playing the role of the mascot. For example, in September of 2015, the Arizona State Sun Devils football team played a game against the University of New Mexico. At halftime, ASU had prepared a program honoring the City Council. The mayor of Tempe, and a few other city officials, were lined up on the field as they were being honored. To Sparky (the Arizona State University’s “Sun Devil” mascot), this must have looked like a dull moment that needed livening up, and so he ran out and jumped on the back of one of the City Councilmen. He did not know that the Councilman had recently undergone back surgery. Sparky’s playful jump cost the City Councilman another week in the hospital and the University more than \$100,000 in damages. In news stories, we never saw the name of the student who was playing the role of our mascot. However, we suspect that all students applying for the job are now receiving an extra level of training about their own safety as well as the safety of spectators and participants.

Sparky the Sun Devil is dressed in the team colors of maroon and gold. He carries a trident, which is colloquially called “a pitchfork.” The idea of the trident allows fans to get more involved in the game. If they hold one arm high in the air and out in front of them, they can use their thumb to hold down their ring finger so that from a distance it looks like they are holding up Sparky’s trident, while shouting the suggestive message of “Fork the Wildcats!” (or the name of whatever team we are playing). An extra advantage of this symbol is that in American Sign Language, it communicates the number “seven,” which in football is the number of points earned by a touchdown followed by the point-after. Even players who have been run over by opponents and left in a disheveled pile can be seen pushing themselves up from the ground with one hand while making the trident “victory” sign with their other hand.

Before 1946, when our university was a “Teachers’ College,” the mascot had been a live bulldog, but students wanted something more exciting and more specifically related to our university, and so they came up with the idea of a “Sun Devil.” This fits with the fact that our university is located in a desert which at least in the summers is “Hot as H\*ll!” The idea of a “Sun Devil” was originally voted on in November of 1946 when 819 students chose “Sparky, the Sun Devil” while only 196 students voted to stay with “The Bulldog.” A couple

of years later an artist, Bert Anthony, who had worked as an illustrator for the Walt Disney Company and was an alumnus of Arizona State, drew a design that had the horned and smiling Sparky wearing a maroon and gold body suit and carrying a trident. It may have been just a coincidence, but many people thought that the Sun Devil's facial features resembled Walt Disney's face.

It was a unique mascot and became so popular that in the 1970s and early 1980s, local Orange Julius beverage stands began advertising themselves with a drawing of a devil holding a pitchfork wrapped around an orange. Their slogan was "A Devilishly Good Drink." Fortunately, Sparky had been registered as a trademark, and when the ASU alumni association threatened a lawsuit, the restaurant chain dropped both the illustration and the slogan. As the years have gone by, the practice of registering team names and trademarks has proven to be increasingly important both for college and professional sports.

In 2013 when Arizona State University wanted to update the image of the Sun Devil before using it in a new marketing campaign that would include new team uniforms and the re-painting of Sparky on school-owned property, university officials went to the Walt Disney Company and asked for an updated drawing. However, students weren't pleased with the new version, and so the company was asked to provide four alternate designs. A vote was held, with 55 percent of the students voting for the design that was the closest to the original, except that it was made from material that was easier to clean.

It is probably for safety that many mascots ride into the sports arena on a horse or in some kind of specially designed vehicle. However, in 1993 at the University of Oklahoma, a "Sooner Schooner" tipped over. It was a covered wagon named after the wagons that in 1899 were used by settlers racing into the State of Oklahoma in hopes of claiming the best pieces of land for themselves and their families. Those who studied the accident thought that either a horse's hoof or one of the wagon wheels got caught in the artificial turf, which was badly frayed. The stadium entrance was soon remodeled so there wouldn't be a repeat of the incident.

Here in Phoenix one of the mascots whose photo often appears in the sports section of the newspaper is a gymnast, costumed as a gorilla and affectionately named *Go* for the Phoenix Suns basketball team. As is the custom with mascots, *Go* has assigned duties such as raising the Phoenix Suns flag "in the name of team pride." His biography, which is printed in the program, contains several little jokes, for example:

From his early days in the *Banana Republic* to his education at *Fur-man University*, the Gorilla has always had a passion for basketball. Before his debut with the Phoenix Suns, the Gorilla delivered singing telegrams. However, in 1980 the Gorilla's fate changed when he stepped onto the court during a game and surprised unsuspecting players and fans by shooting a basket. His antics became an instant hit and the Gorilla has been a member of the *Phoenix Suns* ever since.

A recently added note reads: “These days, *the king of the jungle* now rules as the *Dean of NBA mascots* after his 2006 induction into the Mascot Hall of Fame.” *Go* is provided with a trampoline, which is pulled out onto the floor before the game starts and during intermission. He runs in and jumps onto the trampoline while at the same time trying to slam dunk the basketball. He actually gets bigger laughs when he fails than when he succeeds.

Our Arizona professional baseball team has an especially amusing name. It is called the *Arizona Diamondbacks*, in a pun that ties together the diamond-shape of baseball fields and the fact that the most common poisonous snake in Arizona is the “Diamond Back” rattlesnake. The backs of these snakes are patterned with a row of darker-colored diamond shapes. Rattlesnakes are a fairly common resident of Arizona’s deserts and prairies, but because their bite is deadly people flee when they hear the buzzing sound that agitated rattlesnakes make by swishing their tails in the air. Their tails end in a kind of lightweight and loosely segmented set of shells, which make a unique buzzing sound.

Certainly no team is going to bring a real rattlesnake to a game, nor does the snake appear on the team uniforms or other paraphernalia. Probably because the word *Diamondbacks* is so long, the team is often referred to simply as the *D-Backs*, which means that some of the winter visitors who come to Arizona to enjoy the warm weather probably miss out on the allusion.

In the history of several colleges, the mascot started out as a real animal, but real animals die, and are hard to control, especially when frightened by crowds. This means that today if an institution has a real animal, it probably also has a costumed version. And the relatively few “real” animals are more likely to be assigned particular jobs, as with the three mules who pull a wagon into the games for the US Military Academy at West Point. At the University of Texas in Austin, it’s appropriate to parade Bevo, a live Texas longhorn steer, because the school’s name is *The Texas Longhorns*. However, no one expects *Bevo* to do any tricks, and longhorn steers look so much like each other that ranchers have to brand them to tell which one is theirs. Unbranded steers are called mavericks; therefore, the university does not necessarily have to bring out the same animal each time.

The University of Oklahoma starts its games by having two white ponies (*Boomer* and *Sooner*) pull a *Sooner Schooner* into the stadium. In the 1890s, the term *Sooner Schooner* was applied to the covered wagons that settlers lined up at pre-determined borders in Oklahoma where they could wait for a cannon to be fired and then rush in and lay claim to the best pieces of land, i.e. the ones that had water or a road nearby or that looked especially fertile as judged by how much grass was growing. They could not cross the starting line until they heard the firing of a cannon. Perhaps the word *Sooner* was applied to those who cheated and started out before the signal, or maybe it was just an acknowledgement of the people whose horses were the fastest.

Obviously there are many benefits connected to the playing of sports. Exercise is good for the body, and even in something as short as recess at school, children come back into class refreshed and ready to tackle academic challenges. And looking forward to a big game on the weekend – even if you are only a spectator – adds a pleasant feeling of anticipation to both players and spectators. Humans are apparently competitive and sports are a good way to satisfy this need. However, as with many good things, this competitive feeling can sometimes get in the way of other desirable emotions.

### **Sports Mascots: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly**

When we examine the names and the mascots created for various sports teams, we can see how some of them have suffered from nothing more than “bad luck,” while others have suffered – or are still suffering – from “bad vibes” connected to their names. For years, Kennesaw State University used the name *Hooters* for its mascot, which was a costumed owl. But something like fifteen years ago, it sent an announcement to its alumni and to news outlets announcing that it would no longer use *Hooters* as a mascot name because the word “had unfortunately taken on new connotations.” The letter writer was referring to the *Hooter’s Restaurants*, which in their advertising campaigns feature full-breasted, scantily clad waitresses because the word *hooters* has become a slang terms for women’s breasts. Apparently no replacement mascot had been chosen at the time, but on October 19, 2013, a news release went out announcing that during the second annual “Flight Night” held at the Kennesaw Convocation Center, its new mascot would be introduced. He is “the first-ever live Owl mascot,” named *Sturgis* after Horace Sturgis, who was the school’s first president.

The announcement explained that “after several years of discussing the concept of a live owl to serve as the official mascot of Kennesaw State,” the decision was made in the spring of 2013. The live owl was born April 8, 2013 in New York, and is cared for by Daniel Walthers, a professional animal keeper, who raised, trained, and introduced the first live bird mascots *Rise* and *Conquer* for the Baltimore Ravens (a professional football team) in 2008 and 2009. According to the announcement, *Sturgis*, the Kennesaw Owl, was expected to grow to about six pounds and to have a wingspan of around five feet. He may live as long as 60 years, but obviously it will be only on special occasions when he is brought out for the public to see.

*Beaver* is another word that at least in American slang has taken on sexual connotations. Arcadia University in Glenside, Pennsylvania was founded in 1853 as Beaver Female Seminary; however, over the years, it has gone through several changes, both of its sponsors and of its locations. Finally, in July of 2001, it attained university status and changed its name to Arcadia University.

There is a rumor that while it was still named Beaver College, browsers would delete the name from the Internet because they thought it was a code word related in some way to sexual matters.

Certainly anyone who has seen the amazing dams that real beavers have built across rivers and streams can understand how the animal's name was often cited in such phrases as "busy as a beaver," and in such names as *Beaver County* in the states of Oklahoma, and in Pennsylvania and Utah. Also, there is a *Beaver City* in Nebraska and a *Beaver Dam* in Kentucky. It truly is amazing to look at some of the dams that beavers have built; however, as cities crowd in on American wildlands and rivers, fewer and fewer people have ever seen real beavers doing their work.

Another animal that was seen more by early settlers than by today's Americans is the eagle, which used to soar high over both prairies and mountains. This undoubtedly played a part in the choice of an eagle to be the symbol of America. It appears on all of our money and on many other legal documents. Seven colleges have an eagle for their symbol and all but two of them gave their eagle a first name starting with *E*; for example, *Eddie the Eagle*, *Eli the Eagle*, *Ellsworth the Golden Eagle*, *Eppy the Eagle*, *Ernie the Eagle*, and for both Bridgewater and Embry-Riddle Aeronautical Colleges, *Ernie the Eagle*. Marquette added *Golden* to give more value to its *Eagle*. It shares the idea of something precious like gold with the *Golden Griffin* from Canisius College, the *Golden Lion* for Raritan Valley Community College and *Goldy the Gopher* for the University of Minnesota.

This last example of *Goldy the Gopher* is surprising because gophers aren't exactly high-prestige animals. In fact, they have "donated" their name to low-prestige office workers. People who used to be called "errand boys" are now called *gophers* because they "go for" whatever the upper-echelon workers need or want. This means that Goucher College's *Mortimer the Gopher* is even more surprising than *Goldy the Gopher*.

Because Stanford University in California has such a high scholarly reputation, it was able to choose a surprisingly low-energy mascot and then associate it with the college's energy and prestige. Since 1975, their mascot has been the *Stanford Tree*, which was chosen to stand out from all the mascots named after animals or after American Indians, a matter discussed later. The *Stanford Tree* is a surprisingly agile dancing conifer of an indeterminate species.

In the early 1970s, the city of Scottsdale in Arizona formed the Scottsdale Community College, and since the students knew they had little hope of competing athletically with the *Wildcats* from the University of Arizona in Tucson, or with the *Sun Devils* from Arizona State University, which was located just a few miles down the road, they came up with the surprising name of *Artie – The Fighting Artichoke*. The thinking must have been similar at the University of North Carolina School of Art, which since 1975 has had the *Fighting Pickle*



as its mascot. *The Fighting Okra* is the “unofficial” mascot of Delta State University, and was featured on the *David Letterman Show* in the 1980s when Letterman put together a “Top Ten List of Worst Mascots.”

To save space, initials are often used in the names of colleges. The designers at Michigan Tech named their mascot *Blizzard T. Husky*. The *T* might remind people of *Tech*, but when the name is formally written out, it is given as *Blizzard the Husky*, which is fitting for a school set so far north that it is in one of the coldest parts of the United States. *Butch the Cougar* at Washington State is sometimes listed as *Butch T. Cougar*, while the name *DIBS* at Xavier University stands for *Demon in a Blue Suit*. At the College of Alameda, *Cool E. Cougar* is commonly called *Coolie*, with the *E* standing for Education.

Of course people are amused the first time they see or hear a clever mascot name, but once the surprise is gone, they look for other attributes, like how well the mascot can cross over to different purposes and different sports, and how it will look on band uniforms, on something as large as a billboard or as small as a football helmet. Can it be made into toys for children, and most important of all, does it have positive connotations that will make people proud to claim it as theirs? And with professional teams, who are mainly interested in earning money, the big question about mascots is how it will appear on stadium signs, and on mugs and sweatshirts and other expensive clothing.

On the negative side, people ask if the mascot could be interpreted as offensive or vulgar. Will it encourage vulgarity and inappropriate behavior on the part of fans? Will it make people uncomfortable, and will it increase hatred? Go online and find pictures of Chief Wahoo, who was designed to represent the Cleveland Indians. This is one of the most controversial mascots in all of sports. People are made uncomfortable just by looking at the ugly drawing, but even more so when they see the character engaged in mean-spirited “play.”

### A Historical Note about American Indians

Humans are apparently competitive, and sports are a good way to satisfy this need. However, as with many good things, this competitive feeling can get in the way. Included in the history of America is the fact that when Christopher Columbus first landed on the American continent in 1492, there were already many people living here, all of whom had their own tribal customs and beliefs. For the most part, Indian tribes had kept separate from each other, having their own customs and languages. Even today, many Indians are appalled if one of their children wants to marry an Indian from a different tribe, but way back in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when thousands of Europeans were arriving and taking for themselves land and other natural resources, widespread hostilities began developing between Native Americans and the newcomers.

Serious wars were fought over how to divide the land between Indians and settlers. In the late 1800s and the early 1900s, reservations were established for various Indian tribes. Also, educational experiments included taking Indian children from their parents and sending them to schools where they were forbidden to use their own languages, with the idea being that they could be “Americanized.” This did not work out.

All countries have their own histories. Because American history is fairly recent, it is played out over and over again in the United States of America (the USA) where nearly all Americans – even those who have newly immigrated – are aware that the land was inhabited long before Columbus landed. As the years went by, the Native Americans were shocked to see thousands of newcomers arriving on the land that they and their ancestors had “owned” for generations. They were probably as surprised as we would be if great airships landed on American soil and deposited “people” from outer space who were unlike any we had ever seen. We would be especially alarmed if these people took it for granted that they could settle wherever they wanted and take whatever they needed for their own sustenance.

Columbus thought he had found his way to the West Indies and so he named the Native Americans that he thought he had discovered *Indians*. Some of the Indians were helpful to the newcomers, but eventually as the shiploads of people kept coming from all over the world, widespread hostilities began developing. Serious wars were fought, the eventual result being that certain geographical areas, called “reservations,” were set aside “for the Indians.” These “reservations” are still scattered throughout what became the United States of America. Wars were fought and various experiments were tried. One of these experiments was the founding of “Indian Schools.” These were boarding schools where Indian children were brought so that they could be “Americanized.” They were given American clothes to wear and were taught English. Children who spoke different languages because they came from various tribes were made roommates and classmates, with the idea that this would be a natural way for them to learn English.

However, this experiment was basically a failure, and only a few adult American Indians remember going to such schools. There was an Indian School in Phoenix, Arizona, fairly close to where Alleen grew up. She remembers that sometimes on Saturday mornings during the 1940s, her mother would drive to the school and pick up a teenage girl to come and help with the Saturday house cleaning. Similar actions took place all over the United States, the results being not that the Indian children were becoming truly educated, but that the females were being “used” as low-grade and low-paid domestic helpers, while the males were being used as low-paid farm workers or mechanical aids. The Indian Schools were gradually closed, the one in Phoenix now being a memorial park and museum. It is located on Indian School Boulevard and is

on such a valuable piece of property that the Government, who now owns the land, will probably sell it in the near future to the highest bidder.

However, one of the leftovers from this earlier period of American history, when Indians and white settlers were often engaged in real wars over who “owned” which parcels of land, are remnants of the feelings of competition between Indians and the settlers who had come from across the ocean. The Indians, who were basically hunters and gatherers, were accustomed to live off the land and from the bounty that nature provided. The settlers were basically farmers and growers. Obviously people with two such different ways of life could not very well be neighbors to each other, and so there has been a feeling of animosity and competition, which in the last few decades has played out across the country in the naming of sports teams and sports mascots.

It became the fashion for sports teams, whose major business is competing with other sports teams, to name themselves after various Indian tribes or Indian heroes and then to make up costumes and stories that would both amuse sports fans and give them ways to exhibit their superiority – all in the name of fun. In the beginning, a few such teams actually included one or two Native American players, but by and large, the sports world was dominated by white businessmen who were looking for ways to make money and created such names for their professional teams as the *Atlanta Braves*, the *Kansas City Chiefs*, the *Washington Redskins*, and the *Cleveland Indians*. Teams sponsored by colleges and high schools followed suit in designing Indian names and mascots for their teams. Because the nature of teams is to play one against the other, there is always a winning side and a losing side, and their fans are expected to “love” their own team and then “hate” the team they are playing against. To make this kind of identification easier, teams were given specific names and “matching” mascots and symbols.

Dozens of stories could be told here, but we will refer only to the two most famous: Chief Illiniwek, the “honoured symbol” of the University of Illinois, and “Chief Wahoo,” who is an especially offensive cartoon image that is used as the “mascot” for the Cleveland Indians football team,

First is the story of Chief Illiniwek, who was the mascot at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in Illinois from 1926 until February of 2007. He was totally invented and loved by the college students, who were trying to attract attention to the University’s marching band. There was never an actual American Indian chief with the name of Illiniwek, nor was there ever a person with that exact name, nor even a tribe called the *Illiniwek*. Years later, historians began to refer to the “Illini consortium” of Indians, which included several different tribes who eventually settled in Oklahoma. As one of these Indians explained to the press, “Of course there weren’t any Indians left in Illinois – They ran us the Hell out of there!”

Chief Illiniwek’s imagined history is older than most of the histories of college or professional mascots. In fact, it was his popularity, starting way back in

the 1920s, that inspired many other schools – from elementary to universities – to choose Indian-related mascots. Many of the schools chose animals, while others chose various ideas from Indian lore. In fact, the University of Illinois's official claim was that Chief Illiniwek was never an official "mascot." Instead, he was an "honored symbol," and so the university is now taking suggestions for their "very first official mascot." The students who played the role of Chief Illiniwek, by creating artifacts and performing at games and other assemblies, were invited to be life members of an organization which has been actively defending their intentions and the good feelings that they had in promoting the image as a positive face for their university.

Genuine American Indians, who came as students to the University of Illinois, were shocked to see that some of their religious customs and deeply held beliefs were being openly shared with thousands of cheering – including many who were drunk – football fans. They began protesting, and eventually the University Board of Regents decided to separate Chief Illiniwek from his official connection to the University. However, many students – especially those who had once done the amazing dance and worn the gorgeous costume – would sneak into athletic events and perform the dance for adoring fans. The original dance was created mainly by students who remembered their days as Boy Scouts when they "studied" Indian lore and history. Such lore is still a part of the history and the practices of the American Boy Scouts, where boys earn "merit badges" for mastery of many outdoors skills. In fact, when we were recently asked to donate money to help repair a summer camp for Boy Scouts in Arizona, we were surprised to see that it was named "Camp Geronimo," after one of Arizona's most famous Indians.

Unlike some sports mascots, Chief Illiniwek was definitely "loved" by many of the Illinois students and alumni. For example, a couple of years ago, a senior citizen from Illinois was in one of our humor classes and she very carefully packed her collection of "Chief Illiniwek" mugs in a bag and brought them to show the other class members. They had been on a "shelf of honor" in her home for thirty years. We could tell that she truly "honored" the idea of the symbolism and the admiring nod to the Illini Indians – even though there had never been such a tribe. She was so happy to talk about all the ways that Chief Illiniwek was honored that Alleen, who earned her Ph.D. at the University of Iowa, which is a long-time competitor of the University of Illinois, felt too ashamed to tell the class about the fraternity boys at Iowa who, on the weekend before a big game with Illinois, had created fake statues of dead Indians. On the day of the biggest game of the year, they had hung an upside-down "dead Indian" from each of the trees that lined the street leading to the stadium.

The problems that arise over people being offended by Indian mascots are more likely to come from the teams that oppose them than from the teams that sponsor them. But in the case of the Cleveland Indians, it is the mostly the

professional artists working for the Cleveland Indians team who have drawn the caricature of a figure known as Chief Wahoo. His picture offends the general public – both Indian and non-Indian. He doesn't even look like an Indian – instead he is a mixture of several racist stereotypes. His skin is darker than that of real Indians, his nose is hooked, and his teeth and eyes so exaggerated that he is nothing but an offensive and racist caricature. He isn't even a Chief (Chiefs wear whole headdresses, while braves have only a single feather). He has a huge, hooked nose, which Indians do not have, and his oversized white teeth emphasize an evil grin, along with oversized eyes whose irises are changed to make him look one way or the other.

So many people protested against the unfair caricature that finally, in January of 2017, the headline appeared online “Indians to Remove Chief Wahoo from Team Uniforms.” The date given was a little more than a year away, and then the remove was only of a small round head that would no longer go on the team uniforms. However, the team would be free to put as many pictures of Chief Wahoo as they wanted on posters, billboards, tickets, programs, and advertisements.

When we talked about this whole controversy in one of our senior citizen classes, the students smartly observed that going to court may not be the way to solve such problems because the complainants seem to come out worse than they went in. For example, when the Washington Redskins went to court to object to the team's name, the court explained that they could not forbid the use of the name, but they could take away the exclusive rights that the team had to the name, meaning that anyone could use the name. Perhaps in the long run, this will have the effect of encouraging the team to choose a less racist name, but the immediate problem is still not solved.

Something similar is true in the case of Chief Wahoo in that the only place it is being removed is from the uniforms of the players. This is a very limited part of the income that goes to the manufacturers. Our students immediately saw that this was not going to limit the profits being made because the picture of Chief Wahoo can still be on all the paraphernalia – the sweatshirts, the jackets, the toys, and whatever else is manufactured. They predicted that in fact, sales will increase because hard-core fans – the ones who want to show their allegiance and their independence – will probably buy all the more clothing because “Who knows? It will undoubtedly be even more valuable in the future, especially if it finally gets outlawed!”

Our students came to the conclusion that it's very hard to settle such matters as these in courtrooms. They have to be settled by well-meaning and well-educated people who can see the difference between sports – which are supposed to be done in play – and wars – which are actually being conducted to determine real-world power. The two should not be confused.

### Points of Departure

1. Go online and find some photos or drawings, along with stories about sports mascots from your own geographical area. Analyze them as to their attractiveness and to their general appeal. How well do they serve the intended purpose(s) of providing an extra level of entertainment for sports fans?
2. A “space bubble” is the distance between two or more people in a social environment, but personal space bubbles are determined by time, place, gender, culture, etc. Explain how “space bubbles” differ for different cultures (e.g. Asian vs. Latin American), different genders (e.g. male vs. female), different situations (doorway, subway, elevator), and perhaps the amount of paranoia that a person has. For example, two decades ago, the man now known as “The University of Texas Tower Sniper” was described as shooting everyone who entered his space bubble, which was as far as he could see from the shooting place he had fixed for himself inside the campus bell-tower.
3. Explain how the following gestures might be interpreted differently in different cultures: biting your thumbnail, kissing someone on the cheek, putting your hands on your hips, using arm gestures, rolling your eyes, using a finger gesture, or putting your lips in a particular position. Report on whether you have had an experience where the gesture you used was judged to be inappropriate. Were you in a foreign country? Or at a place where the other people were strangers to you? Why would this make a difference?
4. Some people are good at parodying the body language of famous people, as when Tina Fey or Julianne Moore did a parody of Sarah Palin, or when Amy Poehler did a parody of Hillary Clinton, or Alec Baldwin pretended to be Donald Trump, while Melissa McCartney was Sean Spicer, etc. Explain what is involved in these parodies. Try to think of a couple of the kinds of small personal actions that are unique to particular celebrities. Can you demonstrate one such action?

In the digital world there are so many choices that we are able to focus on the television programs, the books, the magazines, the movies, and social events that we think we will enjoy. These actions polarize us by building on the views that we already hold, and hence they reinforce our biases. Conservatives become more conservative, and liberals become more liberal. But humor has the opposite effect, because one of the important features of humor is double vision. A person whose mind is not capable of holding two opposing views at the same time will not catch on to jokes, irony, parody, satire, paradox, or sarcasm, because all of these genres require double vision.

Such humor theories as Script Model Grammar, Incongruity and Incongruity Resolution, the Rule of Three, The Tension and Relief Theory, the Superiority Theory, and the MICH theory also require double vision. Another way of saying this is that in terms of politics, it is up to humor to save the world from the single vision of extremists – whether they are extreme conservatives or extreme progressives.

Effective politicians often try to soften the hard problems they face by inserting a little humor. For example, when Abraham Lincoln (President 1861–1865) wanted to urge Civil War General George McClellan to move a little faster with his attack on Richmond, Virginia, he used a subtle kind of humor by writing: “Dear General, if you do not want to use the Army, I would like to borrow it for a few days.”

During the 1930s, prior to World War II, many Americans were isolationists, and did not want fellow Americans to even know or think about what was going on in Europe and Asia. They were afraid that if Americans knew what was happening, they would want to join the Allied efforts. This resulted in a kind of informal censorship in America, but on January 19, 1940, almost two years before the December 7, 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the Three Stooges released a movie entitled *You Nazi Spy*. Because it was considered “just slapstick comedy,” critics and politicians paid little attention to it, but thousands of Americans saw it. And nine months later these same viewers, plus thousands more, went to see Charlie Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator*. These comic films subconsciously influenced people and helped prepare them for entering the war effort after the December 7, 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor.



In 1956, Senator William Langer wanted to be the Republican nominee for US President, but another man already had the job. The other man was Dwight D. Eisenhower (President 1953–1961), who had already served one successful term. Eisenhower was in his late sixties, and during his first term had suffered a heart attack and also undergone intestinal surgery. The urgency of Senator Langer's desire to become President inspired him to come up with a speech in which he declared, "I deserve the nomination more than Eisenhower does. I'm older. I'm sicker. And I need the rest more than he does." This statement resulted in Senator Langer getting a big laugh, but not the nomination. Probably no one could have beaten General Eisenhower because he was given the credit for bringing World War II to an end. But at least Senator Langer had the feeling that his speech had been a success.

In 1960, the young and handsome John F. Kennedy was elected to fill the position of President. During the campaign, many of his critics felt that he had an unfair advantage because of his family's wealth. So during one speech, he pulled from his chest pocket a wrinkled telegram that he said had just come from his father. He read it aloud: "Don't buy one vote more than necessary. I'll be damned if I'll pay for a landslide."

Cartoonist Mike Peters gained national attention with a cartoon that managed to insult three different US Presidents. The cartoon showed George Washington (President 1789–1797) saying "I cannot tell a lie," Richard Nixon (President 1969–1974) saying "I cannot tell the truth," and Jimmy Carter (President 1977–1981), saying "I cannot tell the difference."

In 1974, Gerald Ford was unexpectedly appointed as Vice President because Spiro Agnew had been forced to resign. Then when President Nixon was also forced to resign, Gerald Ford suddenly became President. One of his best jokes was that he had become "America's first instant Vice President, and then I became America's first instant President." Then he added that the Marine Corps band was so confused that they don't know whether to play, "Hail to the Chief," or "You've Come a Long Way, Baby."

Comedian Chevy Chase used to do a popular parody of Gerald Ford, including his tripping on the stairs of Air Force One. In 1986, a few years after his presidency had ended, Ford hosted a "Humor and the Presidency" symposium at the Gerald R. Ford Museum in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Chevy Chase was invited to speak at the symposium. Ford turned the tables on the comedian by tripping Chevy Chase.

In 1979, Bud Clark, the owner of a popular bar in Portland, Oregon, agreed to be the live model in a poster designed as a fundraiser for a fine arts group. The picture was taken from behind him, and he was wearing only his shoes and socks and an oversized trench coat. He was facing the statue of a beautiful nude woman, and he was holding his trench coat open. The caption said only "Expose Yourself to Art." Half a million copies were sold to benefit the arts group,

and Clark became so famous that in 1982 he was elected mayor of Portland, a job that he held until 1992.

In 1980, Mort Sahl said that people did not vote FOR Ronald Reagan (President 1981–1989) so much as they voted AGAINST Jimmy Carter. Sahl concluded, “If Reagan had been unopposed, he would have lost.” In an attempt to inject some life into the 2008 Presidential campaign, John McCain ran an ad mocking Barack Obama’s celebrity status by comparing him with Hollywood stars Paris Hilton and Britney Spears. Hilton responded by posing in a swimming suit by the side of a pool and solemnly announcing that she would be happy to be considered for the Vice Presidency.

In 1981, when President Reagan was shot by John Hinckley and was taken into the operating room of George Washington Hospital for emergency treatment, he quipped, “Please assure me that you are all Republicans.” The world relaxed at this evidence that Reagan was still in control of his sense of humor, which meant that he most likely was going to recover.

In 1985 when Ronald Reagan, who was already the country’s oldest President, was running for re-election, he looked for ways to make voters laugh about his age. At a Gridiron Club dinner in Washington, DC, he noted that the club had been founded in 1885, and lamented that he was not invited to their *first* dinner. He pulled almost the same joke on the Washington Press Club when he mentioned that it was founded in 1919, and then added wistfully, “It seems like only yesterday.” However, his most famous treatment of the issue came during a televised debate with his opponent, Walter Mondale. Of course both candidates knew that one of the questions would be about Reagan’s age, so he came prepared. When the question came up, Reagan with a twinkle in his eye declared, “I will not exploit, for political purposes, the youth and inexperience of my opponent.” This is so famous that you might still be able find it on the Internet. Mondale laughed, along with the rest of the country, but he later said that in his heart, he knew at that moment he had lost the election. And indeed he had. Reagan received 325 votes from the Electoral College, while Mondale received only the 13 votes from his home state of Minnesota.

In 1992, the first President Bush (President 1989–1993) became ill at a televised state dinner in Tokyo. He vomited on the Japanese Prime Minister and then fainted. The dinner guests were both horrified and frightened, especially when First Lady Barbara Bush stood up and said that the incident was the fault of Emperor Akihito and Crown Prince Naruhito, who that afternoon had beaten George in tennis. Then she explained, “We Bushes aren’t used to losing!” At this point, everyone realized that she was telling a joke, and on the televised account of the event, the audience could be seen taking a collective sigh of relief. They knew she would not have made a joke if she thought the President were in real danger.

In the early 1990s, Richard Zoglin wrote in *TIME* magazine that political correctness started out as the province of a small band of liberal reformers. But he says that it has now become an establishment orthodoxy. But there is an irony here, because the fact that political correctness has become such an established norm makes it an acceptable target for satire and parody. Zoglin concludes that “It is now politically correct to make fun of political correctness.”

One of the problems that politicians have in the digital age is that they can say something appropriate to a particular audience, but what they say is recorded and presented to a different audience, for whom it is not appropriate. After a newsreel filming when the cameras were turned off, President Reagan made a joke about “bombing Russia.” Everyone in the room knew it was a joke and did not worry about it because Reagan had an agreement with the film crew that they would not record anything except when the camera lights were on. However, he had not made any such agreement with the newspaper and magazine reporters in the room, and so they wrote the joke down and published the news in the next day’s morning newspapers. There had to be a lot of backtracking.

Something similar happened to George W. Bush when he was first running for the Presidency, and he and Dick Cheney were in a televised debate against Walter Mondale and Geraldine Ferraro. Ferraro was the first woman to be included in the final four of a Presidential election. The next day when a reporter complimented George W. Bush on how well he had done, he happily bragged, “We tried to kick a little ass last night.” A generous interpretation is that he was speaking in general terms, but the reporters on the set applied it specifically to how he thought he had beaten Geraldine Ferraro. This was not helpful to the Bush campaign, but nevertheless he was the final winner.

In the 2012 election, Mitt Romney was attending a private luncheon with a group of wealthy donors where no reporters were allowed. He made what has come to be known as the “47 percent remark,” in which he said that 47 percent of Americans pay no income tax. His implication was that nearly half the country was just taking a “free ride” that the rest of us were paying for. Someone – a dishwasher was suspected – recorded the speech and when it was later circulated to the general public, it may have cost Romney the election.

The language of politics is filled with political spin. For example, George Carlin did a “comic” analysis of the changes in the words used to talk about soldiers suffering from their experiences. During World War I, we used the expression “shell shock” – two syllables, simple, honest, direct language. During World War II, the expression had changed to “battle fatigue” – four syllables, plus “fatigue” is a nicer word than “shock.” During the Korean War, the expression had changed to “Operational Exhaustion” – eight syllables now and the humanity has been squeezed out; it’s now totally sterile. During the Vietnam War we had “Traumatic Stress-Disorder” – still eight syllables, plus a hyphen. The pain is now buried under the jargon.

### **The Jokes that Impeached a Governor: A Case Study in Local Political Humor from 1986–7**

In March of 2017, a letter to the editor of our local newspaper, the *Arizona Republic*, asked “Is it going to be *Mecham* all over again?” The writer was referring to how the jokes currently being made about America’s newly elected President, Donald Trump, were similar to the jokes that long-time Arizona residents remembered from the late 1980s when they contributed to the impeachment of Evan Mecham as the Governor of Arizona. We are writing about this particular incident because it is one that we lived through and in which we participated, and while at the time we thought it was unique, we now see that many of the same ideas and techniques are still being used throughout the United States, and perhaps in other countries as well.

Evan Mecham was a white middle-aged businessman, who in 1986 was elected to a four-year term as Governor of Arizona. He was impeached in 1988. He was an ultra-conservative Republican, who had been a successful Pontiac car dealer in a suburb of Phoenix. We heard our first joke about him on the evening of the November 1986 election when we were standing in line waiting to buy movie tickets. An acquaintance walked by and stopped to chat about the election. His comment regarding the newly elected governor was “What a pity to waste a \$400 toupee on a two-bit head.”

We smiled at the witticism, but the people standing behind us laughed out loud. We later realized that this was just the beginning of a humor epidemic that would build over the next seventeen months until the Governor was impeached. One reason it took so long for Evan Mecham to be impeached is that Arizona has a law protecting newly elected officials. They must have a chance to “prove themselves” by serving in office for six months before they can be considered for impeachment.

Governor Mecham got off to a bad start because as soon as he was elected in November, almost two months before he would be inaugurated in January, he announced that he was cancelling the State holiday scheduled by the previous Governor to honor the birthday of Martin Luther King (1929–1968). King had been an African-American civil rights leader who, much to the horror of many Americans, was assassinated on April 4, 1968. The February holiday is now mandated by the Federal Government, but at the time it was just an idea that many states had optioned to support as a token of respect for the work that Dr. King had done in trying to bring justice to African-Americans throughout the country.

Mecham believed that the previous Governor did not have the legal right to declare a State holiday, and so he was canceling it. He thought people would be grateful for the way he was taking a stand, but actually many people in Arizona did want to honor Martin Luther King and they were embarrassed that

their new Governor was being so blatantly racist. Also Mecham had forgotten that he had not won the election through a majority vote. Usually in Arizona there would have been only two candidates for Governor: one Republican and one Democrat. But because of a complicated health issue in the family of one of the Democratic candidates, he was allowed to enter the contest after the primary election had already been held. This irritated feminists in the state, who suspected that the decision to let him enter late had something to do with misogynist fears of Arizona having its first female governor. Anyway, when the votes were counted, no candidate had received a majority, but Evan Mecham had received about 40 percent of the vote and so he was declared the winner.

Historically, people who serve in public positions without having received a majority of the vote often have a hard time gaining popularity. However, Governor Mecham seemed totally unaware of the fact that he would need to “court” Arizona voters if he wanted a majority of them on “his side.” Instead, he dove in at full strength by declaring that the Martin Luther King holiday had to be cancelled. He was immediately charged with racism. A December 18, 1986, cartoon by Steve Benson for the *Arizona Republic* showed Mecham sitting on Santa’s knee “dreaming of a White Christmas.” The next month, the local *Tribune* newspaper carried a Gary Markstein cartoon showing a portrait of King saying, “I have a dream!” juxtaposed with a portrait of a villainous Mecham saying, “Dream on!” (January 18, 1987).

While most Arizonans – at least those we associated with at the University – agreed that it is unfair to joke about disabled people, or about people of “other” ethnicities, we were surprised at how many of our friends, whom we had always considered to be “people of goodwill,” threw off their self-constraints when they saw that the new Governor was “Hell-bent” on abolishing the tribute to Martin Luther King. This was before cable television, and the existing television and radio stations, all of which had to be licensed by the FCC (Federal Communications Commission), were hesitant to broadcast the jokes for fear of losing their FCC licenses. However, when people called into talk-shows or made requests of disc jockeys, they often managed to slip in sly jokes. Monday mornings were more fun at work because people came with new Mecham jokes that they had heard over the weekend. Schoolchildren, even if they didn’t understand the jokes, took them home to their parents, and once when Alleen called a government office in Washington DC to check on a detail related to a grant that she had, the woman who answered the phone, said, “Wait! Let me tell you the joke I just heard about your Governor!” Here are a few examples:

- Did you hear that Mecham ordered the U. of A. School of Agriculture to develop chickens with only right wings and all-white meat?
- Why did Mecham cancel Easter? He heard the eggs were going to be colored.
- What do Mecham’s political appointees have in common? Parole officers.

An Arizona journalist, John Kolbe from the *Phoenix Gazette*, became famous when Governor Mecham first forbade him to attend press conferences, and then on reconsideration said he could attend but that he was a “nonperson” and his questions wouldn’t be acknowledged. This inspired dozens of comments and jokes about “nonpersons.” The following letter to the editor from Richard Lucero was published in the *Arizona Republic* on March 14, 1987: “I was wondering, since Gov. Evan Mecham has declared John Kolbe a non-person, and Dr. Martin Luther King’s birthday a non-holiday, could he make me a non-minority?”

A few months after Mecham’s inauguration, a KZZP disc jockey amused his listeners with a funny “Mr. Ev” parody of the theme song from television’s show about the talking horse, *Mr. Ed*. A month later, he did a parody based on the rock group *Dead or Alive*’s hit song, “What I really need to do is find a brand-new lover.” The parody went “What we really need to do is find a brand-new governor.” On February 12, Toni Stanton started her daily radio show in Tucson by referring to Ev Mecham as “the Fred Astaire of Hoof and Mouth Disease.” On March 28, KTAR in Phoenix took advantage of Mecham’s complaint that he wasn’t getting a fair shake in the public media by inviting people to phone in and say something good about the Governor. Some listeners interpreted this as an invitation for humor. The funniest was the man who in a deadpan voice explained that he was a drug addict and was extremely grateful that Mecham was going to provide him with drugs. “How’s that?” questioned the surprised host. “Why, haven’t you heard his slogan?” responded the caller, “A Drug-Free Arizona.”

Mecham appointed as his Education Advisor a retired, conservative dairy farmer, who encouraged the State Education Committee to pass a bill requiring that creationism be taught alongside evolution in public schools. He was widely quoted for saying that teachers have “no business correcting students whose parents teach them the earth is flat” (*TIME*, March 9, 1987, p. 42). A KOY disc jockey asked callers to phone in suggestions about what he should put in Mecham-look-alike piñatas, which he was planning to sell for nine dollars. One caller suggested that he add a two-dollar charity tax to purchase flat globes for schools. That same day, College of Education faculty members at Arizona State University found in their mailboxes fake membership invitations from the Flat Earth Society.

In April of 1987, when Mecham had been in office for three months, our University co-sponsored with the *Workshop Library on World Humor* an April Fools’ Day Humor Conference. More than 500 scholars from the United States and thirty nations gathered on campus for a three-day meeting. Because the business of those attending was analyzing humor and its uses, we devoted one session of the conference to jokes about Governor Mecham. The session received considerable publicity, partly because the local newspapers, as well

as television and radio stations, had been looking for ways to print some of the jokes without appearing to be taking sides, and now they could print them as “news” from the conference.

The most popular joke at the time was a story about a fire at the Governor’s house that started in the library and burned both books – “And one hadn’t even been colored in yet!” A conference attendee from Germany recognized the joke as having been told about the mayor of his town, while other participants remembered hearing similar jokes about controversial Senator Joe McCarthy in the 1950s and controversial Presidential Candidate George Wallace, who in 1972 was shot three times and spent the rest of his life paralyzed from the waist down. The joke about Wallace was:

What’s the difference between George Wallace and Evan Mecham?

Well, Wallace is paralyzed from the waist **down**.

When the conference delegates went home, they took the Mecham jokes with them, but they also left us with some of their own. The funniest joke we heard was from a man who told about a conflict in his country over honoring a retiring prime minister with a stamp. However, the idea was shelved when the man’s enemies pointed out that “Everybody would spit on the wrong side.”

An Australian newspaper called our University to check on the spelling of Mecham’s name (the *New York Times* was spelling it as *Meacham*.) The BBC called for an interview on Mecham jokes, and Mark Russell wrote to say that political satirists the world over were facing Arizona and bowing in gratitude for the wealth of new material. Undoubtedly, the most “scary” call was the one that was forwarded to us by the University President’s office, which had received a call from the Governor’s Office asking if any state funds had been used to support the conference. By this time, bumper stickers were sprouting like spring flowers:

Mecham for EX-governor.

Martin Luther King had a dream. Arizona has a nightmare.

Don’t blame me. I voted for Carolyn. [Carolyn Warner had been the original Democratic candidate running for Governor.]

We’ll all be gay when Mecham’s recalled.

Impeacham!

I’ll take a urine test if Mecham will take an IQ test.

Don’t get mad! Get Evan!

Philosopher Henri Bergson, in a 1911 essay on “Laughter,” wrote that “Laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary.” When people laughed at the Mecham jokes, they experienced a bonding with the joke-tellers against the Governor. This pleasant feeling of amusement and complicity – even if remembered only



on a subconscious level – undoubtedly made people more likely to sign recall petitions, which some 350,000 Arizonans did between July and November of 1987.

Both the television shows, *Sixty Minutes* and *Nightline*, did features on the controversial nature of Mecham's governorship, while in 1987 Mark Siegal published a humorous book entitled *The World According to Evan Mecham*. Two Phoenix writers, Philip L. Harrison and Dan McGowan, also published a collection of Mecham jokes, but when they were asked in April of 1988 if they were going to do a follow-up book, they said "No," and explained to the *Metro Phoenix* magazine that "the jokesters are becoming acerbic and the jokes full of invective." They gave as an example of an "unfunny" new joke a story about Mecham opening a housing subdivision called *Mecham Meadows*. The Grand Opening prizes were free wigs for the first 500 adults and handguns for all the kids. They concluded that the "sense of bemused bewilderment" characterizing the early jokes was gone and so the jokes simply weren't "all that funny any more."

A generous interpretation of the joking is that Arizonans were using it for what Henri Bergson described as a "social corrective" for the utilitarian aim of general improvement. Through ridicule, they were trying to teach the governor and like-minded people that certain behaviors and attitudes were inappropriate. A less generous interpretation is that liberal, educated Arizonans who for years had refrained from telling racist, ethnic, and sexist jokes were relieved to have a socially acceptable target for hostile humor, i.e. a white, arrogant male in a position of power – and so they pulled out all the stops and had great fun retooling and retelling old, hostile jokes.

At the 1987 Humor Conference, James Eiseman and Stephen Spanghel, from the Department of Communication at the University of Louisville, discussed "The Role of the Innocent in Television Situation Comedy Series." Their comments related to Governor Mecham in some interesting ways. They talked about television's power to purvey the myths that reflect and influence American thinking and conjectured that sitcoms are popular because they "present and validate our underlying beliefs in ways that are otherwise rarely articulated or discussed."

One of these myths centers around the "Innocent," who is a character included in nearly every sitcom. The Innocent reinforces our desire to believe in the self-made individuals who succeed without education. Audiences are willing to place enormous trust in those who speak honestly and "from the heart." Eiseman and Spanghel described these Innocents as being "naïve, simple, ingenuous, unsophisticated, natural, unaffected, guileless, and artless: as they exhibit few traces of formal education." They also speak their minds "frankly and openly, and understand what is said solely on the literal level."

This is almost a perfect description of the way many of the Arizonans who chuckled over Mecham jokes viewed their Governor. In the first few months of his term, Mecham served as a real-life icon for the kind of gentle fun usually associated with television sitcoms. He was like Lisa, the city slicker in *Green Acres*; like Radar, the Iowa farm boy in *M\*A\*S\*H*; like Woody, the Indiana hick in *Cheers*, and like Mork the alien, in *Mork and Mindy*.

The most striking characteristic that Governor Mecham had in common with these fictional Innocents is the way that he interpreted language in only a literal sense. In September of 1987, Gary Trudeau drew a four-day vignette about Mecham for his *Doonesbury* comic strip. When a reporter from the *Mesa Tribune* interviewed Mecham, his response was "It's totally unfactual. There isn't any mirth in it." Two weeks later, Mecham was criticized for telling a group of tourists that when Japanese visitors hear that Arizona has over 200 golf courses, "their eyes get round." He defended himself by saying that he "hadn't insulted anyone" because some Japanese, even in their own country, are having plastic surgery to get round-shaped eyes.

This lack of understanding about language change and connotation is also what got him in trouble when he defended the use of the word *pickaninny* as an affectionate way of referring to the children of black people. He explained that when he was growing up, "blacks themselves referred to their children as *pickaninnies*." This gave rise to the witticism, "Pickaninny: What we did for governor."

Another characteristic of Innocents is that what at first appears to be stupidity becomes in time "a sort of non-linear logic." Even after being made aware of how others perceive a situation, the Innocent will often turn the information to a laughable connection that surprises listeners. Mecham did this so often that people began conjecturing on whether someone – perhaps one of his children or a political ally – had taken him aside and tried to give him a quick lesson on "political correctness," that is on how he needed to be more sensitive to the connotations of language.

He apparently got some idea of which words to be careful about, but he confused the details, as shown by the way he welcomed a Jewish group to a breakfast by talking about America being "a great Christian nation." And if he had really understood, he would not have answered a charge of bigotry by saying that he had black friends and that at his car dealership he hired African-Americans not because they were black, but because they were the best people who applied "for the cotton-picking job."

Phoenix was one of the scheduled stops for Pope John Paul's September 1987 visit. When Mecham was asked on his KTAR "Talk with the Governor" radio show what he was going to say to the Pope, he responded, "Golly,

I don't know whether he speaks English or not." This spawned the last joke that Arizonans truly laughed at:

Did you hear what the Governor said to the Pope?  
 "How's the little woman?"

This joke was printed in the May 1988 *Washington Monthly*, under the title "The Jokes that Impeached a Governor." Other riddles included:

- Why does Evan Mecham have to open his mouth? So he can change feet.
- How do you spell relief? R-E-C-A-L-L.
- What do Mechan and an untrained puppy have in common? They both cringe at the sight of a newspaper.

People even made up a joke to explain Mecham's eventual impeachment, which was based not on his insensitivity and prejudices, but on the fact that he had been dishonest by "loaning" \$80,000 of the State's money that was set aside for his inauguration to his auto dealership. His brother, Willard Mecham, had been his financial advisor throughout his campaign, and so he got part of the blame, which resulted in the last joke to come from the eighteen-month ordeal: "Willard did it!" Over the next several months, this simple sentence was used as an all-around excuse for whatever misfortune happened without an obvious perpetrator. After his impeachment, Evan Mecham lived another twenty years, but he did not return to his car dealership. Instead, he spent his time writing a self-published book, *Wrongful Impeachment*, and trying unsuccessfully to create a public newspaper to give a voice to the people in Arizona who he thought were unfairly silenced. He lived the last four years of his life in the Arizona State Veterans' Home where he suffered from dementia.

### Political Humor on Late-Night Television

In January of 2018, President Donald Trump bragged that his State of the Union address viewership – 45.6 million – was "the highest number in history." But in fact, both Barack Obama and Bill Clinton had more viewers for their addresses. So, on *Late Night*, Stephen Colbert concluded, "Nielsen only counts American viewers, but we're confident plenty of Russians were tuning in, too." Colbert said that men in trench coats were counted incorrectly as they were actually "three small people stacked on each other's shoulders." Trump's figures could also have been increased by counting people possessed by demons, time travelers, and aliens who will watch the broadcast in the future.

In his 2018 State of the Union speech, Donald Trump attempted to expand the term "Dreamers," by saying that we're all "dreamers." On *The Daily Show*, Trevor Noah accused Trump of pulling an "All Lives Matter" on the DREAMers. Noah said that Fox News praised Trump's speech because Trump had used the word "America" a whopping eighty-two times in a ninety-minute address. But according to Noah, the people who loved his speech the most of

all had the last name of Trump. Donald Trump Jr. told about how his “legs got a workout” from standing again and again, and Eric Trump said his hands were “sore from clapping.” Noah said that Trump’s speech was all about celebrating President Trump, but Trump actually did “reach across the aisle – and not just to grope someone, but to try to get things done.” Noah also took a dig at the Democrats at Trump’s speech. Noah said that Chuck Schumer and Nancy Pelosi looked like “Trump had cheated on them with Stormy Daniels” (Stormy Daniels is the film star who allegedly had an affair with Trump).

After Trump’s State of the Union address, Seth Meyers said, “Congrats to Logan Paul for no longer being the worst thing on YouTube.” Jimmy Fallon remarked that Trump had read off a teleprompter during his entire address, even though he had earlier slammed Hillary Clinton for using teleprompters, and at one time had bragged that he didn’t use them. Fallon said that Trump was so untrained in using teleprompters that “his staff had a little Mickey Mouse head over the words like a singalong song.” Jimmy Kimmel also zinged Trump for using a teleprompter, and then remarked that a number of Democrats had brought immigrants with them to Trump’s speech, but not just Democrats. The President had also brought an immigrant as a guest – his wife, Melania. Kimmel also said that at the State of the Union address, “there was more forced applause than at a Kim Jong-un birthday parade.” Commenting on the dour expressions on the faces of the black caucus, Kimmel noted that Trump’s taking credit for low unemployment among black people “is like Ryan Seacrest taking credit for the new year.” Even James Corden had something to say about Trump’s State of the Union speech. Corden mocked the fact that Trump’s team planned to broadcast the name of anyone who made donations to his re-election efforts by saying, “I hope viewers at the livestream enjoyed my donation on behalf of Penis von Penisface.” Referring to Betsy DeVos, Trump’s pick for the Secretary of Education, Corden said, “If you donated \$200 million, you could be Trump’s Secretary of Education.”

More than once, Donald Trump has said that he is the least racist person the interviewer has ever met, so Bill Maher made a list of all of the black people that Donald Trump has picked a fight with: Colin Kaepernick, LaVar Ball, Barack Obama, Eric Holder, the war widow from the failed raid in Niger, the war widow’s congresswoman, the Central Park Five, Steph Curry, the UCLA basketball players arrested in China, Whoopi Goldberg, April Ryan, the entire NFL, the cast of *Hamilton*, the cities of Atlanta and Chicago, Nigeria, Haiti, and the entire continent of Africa.

On *Saturday Night Live*, Alec Baldwin played Donald Trump. In December of 2017, Baldwin’s *Saturday Night Live* sketch was inspired by Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*. In this sketch, Trump was visited by the ghost of Michael Flynn in chains, representing Jacob Marley (“the ghost of witness flipped”), and by the ghosts of Christmas past (Billy Bush, of *Access Hollywood* fame), present (Vladimir Putin) and future (Hillary Clinton).

Melissa McCarthy's impression of Sean Spicer may have been one of the reasons that he resigned. When interviewed, Spicer said that he could see some of the humor in McCarthy's "Spicey" impression, but he felt it went overboard. It also made him uncomfortable that he was being portrayed by a woman. Most people thought that her portrayal of the press secretary was both hysterical and outrageously realistic. Melissa McCarthy and her aggressive podium attacked the *Saturday Night Live* crew, and was also taken on to the streets of New York to playfully attack New York drivers and pedestrians. After Spicer resigned as Trump's Press Secretary, Aidy Bryant began playing the role of the current spokesperson, Sarah Huckabee Sanders.

### Points of Departure

1. If you live in an area where political leaders are voted into office, try to collect a couple of examples of anecdotes or jokes told by either a successful or an unsuccessful politician. If you have a hard time remembering such election-year talk, interview someone older than you and see if they can remember an example. Bring at least one example to class for discussion and comparison with what your classmates discover. Did it work for the politician? If so, how and why?
2. During Ronald Reagan's first term, he suffered a few "senior moments" as when, at a 1981 meeting of city mayors at the White House, he greeted Samuel Pierce, his own Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, as "Mr. Mayor," and in one address to the public, solemnly explained that his administration was working to get "unemployment to go up." A particularly nasty joke from the period was a story about "Ronnie and Nancy" (his wife) having lunch. Nancy ordered her main dish, and when the waiter asked "... and the vegetable?" she responded, "Oh, he'll just have the same as I'm having." A benign reading of the joke is simply that the petite little Nancy is out to lunch with the President of the United States, and she has put herself "in charge." However, a malicious interpretation of this joke is that the President is so debilitated that Nancy thinks of him as "a vegetable." Tell how this joke is so nasty that it breaks the "humane humor rules" of not targeting the victim and of not joking about things that the person cannot change. Tell which jokes in this chapter break one or more of the humane humor rules. Does this make the jokes better (more edgy) or worse (more confrontational)?

3. An especially good book that we recommend to people interested in humor and wit at the highest level of the American system of government is Joseph Cummins' 2007 (updated in 2015) *Anything for a Vote: Dirty Tricks, Cheap Shots, and October Surprises in US Presidential Campaigns*. In his introduction, Cummins explained that the reason there is so much vitriol, disguised as humor, in presidential elections is that if people sincerely believe that they have a better candidate with "a superior life philosophy," then they are "more willing to pull out all the stops" to ensure their party's win. Find a couple of examples of how "fake news" was used in the past, and also of a couple of especially vicious "tricks" pulled by early politicians.
4. One of the "new" techniques in the 2016 Presidential campaign was for people to do exaggerated imitations of important figures. See what you can find out about this by searching online for an example. Names you might look under are Tina Fey and Sarah Palin, Amy Poehler and Hillary Clinton, Melissa McCartney and Sean Spicer, Julianne Moore and Sarah Palin, and Alec Baldwin and Donald Trump. Come to class ready to share information or to show examples that may still be online. Do you know of other examples?
5. It is harder for politicians who happen to have an unpleasant name to change it than it is for people aspiring to go into show business or to write under a pen name. One reason is that most people do not go into politics until they are well established and well known. They have to be elected by people who know and trust them, and when an adult changes his or her name, it seems suspicious. Are they trying to hide something? Plus, giving yourself a new name means not being recognized by the people you have known your whole life and have influenced. Also, today most of us know many more people than our grandparents knew, and it's hard to remember the "real" names of all of our acquaintances, much less new names they have given themselves.
6. In our last local election, we had a man named David Schmuck running for the Arizona State Senate. He tried to make a joke about his name by printing billboards that said in big letters "SCHMUCK ... That's Right! Frank Schmuck."  
Here is a letter to the editor of the Arizona Republic from a man named Alvin Stein who wrote to say: "I see that Frank Schmuck is having fun with his name in running for the Arizona Senate. I'd just like to reassure him that if elected in this very right-wing conservative state, he will be surrounded by a large number of Schmucks, so he'll feel right at home."

Do you think this letter helped or hurt Mr. Schmuck's chances? It might be a good learning experience for you as a class to make a list of ten names of people recently elected to positions of authority in your local area. Try putting them in a list from top to bottom, based on how "memorable" and "inspiring" you think their names are. It will be interesting to see if you and your fellow students agree or disagree about the names. Frank Schmuck won the election, which apparently means that the technique of calling attention to his family name served its purpose of helping him stand out from the four other candidates who were running to be the Republican representative in the final election. It is now two years later and he is running for re-election, but this time he is not calling special attention to his name.

7. James Comey, the head of America's FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation), decided to hold a press conference and announce that he had further information about Hillary Clinton that he thought he should report. He did not indicate what the information was, but said that the FBI had found it on a computer owned by Huma Abedin and Anthony Weiner. News accounts kept stressing Anthony Weiner as the owner of the computer, with some reporters even using the name of Huma Abedin Weiner, a name which she has never gone by. Comey did not say what the information was. However, TV comedy show host Bill Maher has conjectured that it was invitations to Chelsea's wedding. There was enough talk about the matter to make some people think that the incident harmed Hillary's reputation just enough to make her lose the election. In April of 2017, Comey apologized, even saying that it made him "slightly nauseous" to think that his actions might have influenced the election. A few days later, President Trump fired Mr. Comey from his job as FBI Director. His action has made for a whole new round of suspicions and innuendos. Using Comey as an example, discuss the concepts of "innuendo," "double-entendre," "suggestion," "implication," and "inference."



### **The Development of Humor Appreciation**

When we first started writing this book, we sent letters to our former students and to our nieces and nephews telling them that we wanted to write about how joking was changing and so we would appreciate it if they would tell us something about how their young children were beginning to develop a sense of humor. What we found out from their answers was that actually, the processes weren't changing as much as we thought. The most complete description came back from Beth Ricks, who earned her Ph.D. at ASU and then went "back home" to marry her college sweetheart. By then he had gone to medical school and had become a pediatrician, and when she wrote back to us, they had two smart little kids, a girl who is five and a boy who is seven. Beth wrote that her children love the same old playfully insulting jokes that she loved.

Just the day before, her 5-year-old had cracked up at a birthday party when all the kids sang:

Happy birthday to you!  
You live in a zoo!  
You smell like a monkey,  
And look like one too!

Her 7-year-old son loves to tell "Knock-knock" jokes. He drives them – and their friends – crazy by telling the same jokes over and over again, and then laughing uproariously. He especially likes the one that ends with "*Orange* you glad I didn't say *banana* again?" She resignedly observed that the tension and the surprise that's supposed to be necessary for humor must come to him from the tension of remembering exactly how to say the punch-line and from the anticipation of how his listeners will react.

She concluded that both of her children, along with their friends, were learning how to tell – and how to react to – jokes. And a big part of their learning was in figuring out how jokes can flip the balance of power, as when children make themselves feel powerful by telling jokes about their teachers, when

adults make jokes about bosses, men make jokes about women, and women make jokes about men.

Psychologist Paul McGhee, who specializes in humor studies, advises parents not to wait for their children to develop their cognitive skills before using humor with them. Instead, he says that adults who use humor with children in a playful and stress-free environment give children a head start in their cognitive development. For example, playing peek-a-boo with a baby helps the baby develop what Piaget called “sensorimotor” intelligence, which is the ability to construct a mental picture of a world of objects existing independently from the child. Similarly, playing simple games of hide-and-seek helps babies develop a sense of object-permanence.

McGhee found that children who had recently mastered what Piaget labeled “conservation” were the ones most appreciative of a joke that depended on the understanding that the mass of something is the same even though it is fitted into different containers or its shape is changed. He told children of different ages a joke about a man going to a pizza parlor and asking the server to cut his pizza into four pieces because he wasn’t hungry enough to eat six pieces. First-graders didn’t find the joke funny at all because they hadn’t yet mastered the concept of conservation and so didn’t see the story as a joke.

Neither did eighth-graders find the joke funny, because they had mastered conservation so long ago that there was no tension. The children who were amused by the joke were those in the middle grades. They experienced pleasure because they were at the cognitive level where they could take pride in the fact that they were able to figure out that the amount of pizza was the same regardless of how many pieces it was cut into.

Folklore collector Alvin Schwartz has explained the popularity of children’s vulgar or crude jokes by saying that because matters of the toilet are of considerable concern, there is nothing so funny and so reassuring to children of 6 and 7 as such jokes and rhymes as:

I see London; I see France.  
I see Betsy’s underpants.  
They aren’t green, they aren’t blue,  
They’re just filled with number two.

From matters of the toilet, children go on to joke about secret parts of the body, as in:

Mary had a little bear,  
The best that she could find.  
And everywhere that Mary went,  
There was her bare behind.

As they grow older, children get increasingly brave, as shown by the line in the 1982 Steven Spielberg movie *ET: The Extraterrestrial* when the boy called his brother “Penis Breath.” From 12- and 13-year-olds, Schwartz collected such parodies as

Jack and Jill went up the hill  
To fetch a pail of water.  
Jill forgot to take the pill  
And now she’s got a daughter.

Schwartz says that by the teen years, today’s children know pretty much all there is to know about the body and sexuality, and that their jokes begin to resemble those of adults.

Because of inexperience and a lack of practice in covering up their emotions, children often do and say things that strike adults as funny. Also, young speakers are refreshingly honest in the explanations they give and in the metaphors they create when they can’t think of a standard “adult” way to state what they wish to communicate. Such accidental humor is soon outgrown, although some clever individuals learn to capitalize on their ability to make people laugh, and so they purposely repeat what started out as an accident. For example, at age 10, when Red Skelton was trying out for a job as a salesman in a medicine show, he accidentally fell off the stage and broke several bottles of medicine. People laughed so hard that he began falling on purpose and experimenting with other humorous body movements.

Another example is that of Gene Wilder, who according to his obituary published in *The Week* (September 9, 2016), began developing his comedy skills when he was 8 years old. His mother had suffered a heart attack, and the doctor warned her young son not to argue with her because “it might kill her.” The young boy took the doctor so seriously that he began devising comedy skits to make his mother laugh. The write-up made us wonder whether as an 8-year-old, Gene already had the name of *Wilder*, or if he took that name when he grew up and increased his audience so much that he was making the whole world laugh.

### A Comic Vision vs. a Tragic Vision

John Morreall, who specializes in humor as a part of everyday life, is a Professor of Religious Studies at the College of William and Mary. One of the points he develops is the psychological differences associated with having a “Comic Vision” vs. having a “Tragic Vision” of life. When he lists “Social Differences,” he says that most “new” religions, as with the many denominations in the United States, promote the Comic Vision of life, as in the characteristics listed below on the left, as opposed to the characteristics of the Tragic Vision listed on the right.

**Comic Vision**

Social Equality

vs.

Anti-Heroism

vs.

Pacifism

vs.

Forgiveness

vs.

Questioning

vs.

Situation Ethics

vs.

Social Integration

vs.

**Tragic Vision**

Inequality

Heroism

Militarism

Vengeance

Acceptance of Authority

Duty Ethics

Social Isolation

**Humorous Traits, States, and Behaviors**

Psychologist Willibald Ruch has developed some interesting insights about humor through his writing on states, traits, and behaviors. One of the books that we like to use as an illustration of the difference between traits and states is Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. We were reminded of this when in 2016 the Emeritus College at our University used the book as the centerpiece for a colloquium celebrating the book's sesquicentennial. In Carroll's masterpiece, *traits*, *states*, and *behaviors* are well illustrated through the characters that Carroll created when he stepped out of his role as a professor of mathematics and wrote what is probably the most famous children's book in the world.

The Tea Party given by the March Hare and the Mad Hatter is a good illustration of *states* and *traits*. March hares are in "a state" because spring is their mating time when their libidos overshadow their common sense. Mad hatters suffer from a "*trait*" caused by mercury poisoning. In those days, the felt which was used for making hats had been made with a solution that contained mercury, which causes brain damage. Of course hat makers did not know this, or they would not have held the pins that they needed to do their job between their teeth. Knowing these two facts about the March Hare and the Mad Hatter makes it easier for readers to forgive their bad behavior when they argue with Alice and tell her she should say what she means.

"I do," Alice hastily replied, "at least – at least I mean what I say – that's the same thing, you know."

"Not the same thing a bit!" said the Hatter. "Why, you might just as well say that 'I see what I eat' is the same thing as 'I eat what I see!'"

"You might just as well say," added the March Hare, "that 'I like what I get' is the same thing as 'I get what I like!'"

"You might just as well say," added the Dormouse, who seemed to be talking in its sleep, "that 'I breathe when I sleep' is the same thing as 'I sleep when I breathe!'"

"It is the same thing with you," said the Hatter, and here the conversation dropped [...].

The *behavior* of the Duchess puts her in a constant *state* of hostility, as shown by how she addresses Alice as "Pig!" when Alice shyly asks about the Cheshire Cat's *behavior* of grinning. One of Alice's *traits* is that she likes to show how educated she is, as when she explains to the Duchess, "You see the earth takes twenty-four hours to turn round on its axis..." but the hostile Duchess responds with "Talking of axes ... chop off her head!"

One aspect of psychology is the study of emotions such as anger, fear, surprise, curiosity, love, sadness, desire, happiness, and even goofiness. Psychologists talk about such attitudes as optimism, pessimism, narcissism, gelatofilia, and gelatophobia. Gelatofilia is the personality trait of thinking that everything is funny, while gelatophobia is the personality trait of thinking that nothing is funny. Some people have a strong sense of irony, or play, or sarcasm, or parody, while other people turn everything into a pun, while still other people hate puns.

Donald Lloyd, a linguist at Wayne State University, bet his daughter that he could see the ambiguity in all sentences and therefore be able to misinterpret everything that she said. This game soon became very annoying, so they stopped playing, but not before Professor Lloyd had made the point that everything can be misinterpreted.

But here is the paradox of ambiguity: Everything is ambiguous, but nothing is ambiguous. This is not a contradiction; rather it is a paradox, because without context, everything is ambiguous, but with enough context nothing is ambiguous. And context means not only the words and phrases that surround a particular expression. It also means the social context. And more than that, it means the geographical and historical context, because a New York City CEO doesn't interpret the world the same way that a Texas ranger interprets the world.

Different people have different personality traits. A "serious person" wants to function exclusively in the "bona fide" mode of communication, but this is not true for a playful person. Also, people with paranoid or schizophrenic tendencies see the world literally and unambiguously. Willibald Ruch says that certain personality types prefer certain types of humor. "Affiliative Humor" is interactive and results in social bonding. People using this type of humor say funny things, tell jokes, or engage in spontaneous witty banter. "Self-Enhancing Humor" is a coping mechanism, but so is "Self-Deprecating Humor." It's ironic that self-deprecating humor might be more empowering to the individual than self-enhancing humor. Comedian Rodney Dangerfield (1921–2004) "got not

respect,” but many comedians would love to have gotten the same amount of “no respect” that Rodney Dangerfield enjoyed.

“Aggressive Humor” includes sarcasm, teasing, ridiculing, deriding, disparaging, or putting down other people. Don Rickles and Joan Rivers specialized in this type of humor, but there was always a twinkle in their eyes, and they tended to target the strengths rather than the weaknesses of their “victims.” Finally, there is “Self-Defeating Humor” where people allow themselves to be the butt of other people’s jokes. In many comedy teams, there is the straight man who does the set-up, and the comic who provides the punch-line. The comic usually gets it all wrong, but at the same time elicits the laughter.

Serious people most often find themselves in an earnest, pensive, or sober mood while curmudgeons usually find themselves in a bad mood of sadness, melancholy, or ill-humor, whereas playful people usually find themselves in cheerful moods. However, people’s traits don’t always determine their states. A serious person might be serious most of the time, but even a serious person can be in a playful, cheerful, or hilarious frame of mind. Willibald Ruch says that while ill-humored persons, like serious ones, may not *want* to be involved in humor, people in sad moods *may not be able* to do so even if they would like to. He adds that while sad people aren’t antagonistic to a cheerful group, ill-humored people might be. Also, a bad mood might be a disposition facilitating certain forms of humor, such as mockery, irony, cynicism, or sarcasm.

Finally, there are humorous behaviors, like telling a joke or an anecdote, being goofy or silly, being ironic or sarcastic, sassing, talking back, talking over someone, clowning around (either literally or figuratively), kibitzing, etc. And of course the humorous behaviors often turn into humor states or events, and when people become part of enough humorous behaviors and events, their personalities might change. Or maybe such a bombardment will reinforce their original non-humorous personalities.

Often a person’s emotional state can be predicted by their appearance (e.g. a smile), or their behavior (e.g. laughter), but we have to be careful here. Because there are many things that make us smile, and some of them don’t relate to enjoyment. We may smile as we watch a disgusting or frightening film; we could smile to mask such negative emotions as sadness, anger, or fear. We smile when we are embarrassed, or when we flirt, and some people smile when they feel sadistic pleasure. Sometimes, we may smile even if we have to comply with something that is contemptuous to us, or if we have mixed emotions or feel under social pressure. But of course we also smile if we are amused, surprised, self-satisfied, or happy. Smiles are more likely to express feelings of satisfaction or goodwill, while laughter comes from surprise or a recognition of an incongruity. Also, laughter is basically a public event while smiling is basically a private event.

## Health Psychology

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) was an Austrian neurologist, and “the father” of psychoanalysis. Today, some people prefer to refer to Freud’s field as “Health Psychology,” because the goal is to learn enough about psychology to use it as a way of helping people understand themselves and how the mind and body work together.

Freud said that telling jokes is like dreaming – it is a way to let repressed feelings into the conscious mind. When we express our hostile or sexual feelings we “save” the mental energy we would have expended to repress those feelings. This saved energy can be vented in laughter. A “Freudian slip” is when we say something that we really intended to keep inside our own minds. We are sometimes surprised at how Freudian slips, sort of like dreams, can reveal our “tendencies,” i.e. what we are really thinking and would perhaps like to discuss. One aspect of this field relates to the study of humor in relation to ideas about preventing harmful behaviors while at the same time promoting healthy behaviors and aiding public health policymakers to improve government and school policies that impact people’s health.

Health psychologists study the strategies that individuals use to cope with stress, while at the same time taking action to change unhealthy behaviors. The biomedical model of health psychology considers the body as separate from the mind and looks at health as a biological organism free of disease. The central question is whether humor can help keep a body free of disease, and so health psychologists are interested in studying the chemicals that are inside our bodies, as measured through blood and saliva. The hope is to help vulnerable people build resistance or buffer the effects of stress. The biopsychosocial model considers that people are biological organisms with a mind (thoughts and emotions) who live in social contexts. In this model, humor is thought to influence all three aspects of human life – biological, psychological, and social.

A healthy body’s immune system acts as the body’s defense against infections. Researchers depend on measuring the chemicals in people’s saliva or in their blood to predict levels of immunity. Two of the chemicals that researchers look for are immunoglobulin A in saliva and glucocorticoids in the blood. Researchers have found that both of these chemical changes occur soon after exposure. For example, in one study, participants who watched a thirty-minute comedy immediately showed a higher level of immunoglobulin A in their saliva, as compared to the matched group of participants who had been in another room watching a documentary.

An alternate way of measuring what internal changes are taking place is for people to be put in a pain-tolerance situation. The method most commonly



used is for the subjects to have one of their arms resting in a bucket of ice-water. They are exposed to a certain stimulus, but are free to lift out their arm at any time. A time-keeper is there to measure the exact number of seconds that the subjects can keep concentrating on the stimulus before pulling their submerged arm from the ice water. Here are some of the findings from this type of experiment:

- With promotional or advertising lines, subjects reading a humorous line (e.g. “Drinking can cause memory loss, or worse, memory loss”) and a non-humorous line (e.g. “Alcohol is responsible for around 1,000 cancer deaths”) consistently spent an extra second reading the humorous lines as opposed to the non-humorous lines in sentences relating to alcohol, tobacco, and obesity. Days later, in follow-up sessions, the subjects still remembered the humorous lines better than they remembered the non-humorous lines. However, it is unclear if the better memory was related to the fact that they had spent more time with the funny lines because they had to figure out the jokes, or if their bodies were in better shape to remember the lines because of the hormones released from the part of the brain that appreciated the humor.
- Recent studies continue to support the research that has been done over the last few decades which has shown that twenty minutes of laughter in response to humor is a beneficial exercise for both the respiratory and circulatory systems of the body. It encourages the release of such chemicals as immunoglobulin A, glucocorticoids, dopamine, and endorphins for restoring the kind of equilibrium that is needed to maintain health.

Different kinds of stimuli that subjects have been shown include a humorous audiotape, an interesting-but-not-funny audiotape, an uninteresting audiotape, a multiplication task, and a no-treatment condition. As we might expect, the lowest tolerance level was with the multiplication task, while the highest pain threshold was connected to humor-related stimuli. But in one experiment, where several groups were shown different stimuli, two of the stimulants that proved especially successful in increasing people’s level of pain tolerance were a seven-minute comedy performance and a seven-minute horror film. However, it’s unlikely that any of us will meet researchers who go out advocating that hospital patients should be shown horror films to help them keep their minds off their pain.

In relation to humor in the workplace, a 2015 study was conducted in a large company where workers were dreading a tedious task that came around every year. A third of the workers were shown a comedy before they started the task, while another third watched a video of dolphins in what was classified as a “contentment video,” and the other third watched a neutral business management lecture. When they started the task, all the workers were encouraged to

stick with it as long as they could, but they were free to stop whenever they grew tired. The workers who had watched the humor video stayed with the task nearly twice as long as did the workers in the group that watched the “contentment video” of dolphins, or the group that watched the business management lecture.

Many earlier research studies have shown that humor is therapeutic, in that it acts as an analgesic or a painkiller through releasing endorphins. These chemicals cannot be measured directly, but they do correlate with how long people are able to tolerate pain. As mentioned above, using the ice-water tolerance test is commonly used to measure pain tolerance. An alternate form of this kind of experiment is to use a blood pressure cuff that is automatically being inflated on one arm. The staff member records the exact second when the person asks for the cuff to be removed.

### **The Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ)**

One of the things that is studied in the field of Personality Psychology is Humor Styles. Even though people of all ages and backgrounds engage in humor, their senses of humor differ greatly. Because of this, we suggest that “Sense of Humor” should actually be divided into a number of more specific categories, for example, “Sense of Irony,” “Sense of Sarcasm,” “Sense of Cynicism,” “Sense of Parody,” and “Sense of Paradox,” so that the term “Sense of Humor” can be used as a more all-encompassing term. Personality Psychologists have demonstrated that even though individuals use humor in very different ways, these individuals are fairly consistent in the ways they use humor over time. In other words, each individual’s particular type of humor preference tends to be a stable personality trait. Because of this, Rod Martin, Patricia Puhlik-Doris, Gwen Larsen, Jeanette Gray, and Kelly Weir have developed the “Humor Styles Questionnaire” (see “Individual Differences in Uses of Humor and their Relation to Psychological Well-Being: Development of the Humor Styles Questionnaire,” *Journal of Research in Personality* 37, 2003).

The HSQ test has emerged as a robust model for understanding individual differences in humor styles. The developers of this test assume that humor can be relatively benevolent or potentially detrimental (both socially and psychologically), and so they have designed questions that help to determine which of four humor styles a particular individual most often uses. Two of the styles are positive – Affiliative and Self-Enhancing humor; and two of the styles are negative – Aggressive and Self-Defeating humor. The two positive styles promote health and well-being, while the two negative styles can be detrimental to mental and physical health. The Humor Styles Questionnaire is a thirty-two-item self-reporting survey, making statements such as “I enjoy making people

laugh” and having people respond on a Likert Scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree). The four styles being examined are:

1. **Affiliative Humor** is used to enhance a person's relationships with others. It is positive, benevolent, and self-accepting humor that tends to charm and amuse others, ease tension in social groups, and improve relationships. People who use Affiliative Humor tend to be spontaneous in their joke-telling as they use banter and wit. They enjoy laughing in social situations, and they usually don't use humor at their own expense. They are likely to initiate friendships, and they help to increase group cohesiveness. They also tend to use and appreciate creativity in the workplace. They have high levels of self-esteem, and tend to be psychologically, emotionally, and socially stable. They are seldom depressed and they tend to have high levels of extraversion and openness.
2. **Self-Enhancing Humor** is used by people who have a good-natured attitude toward life. They can laugh at themselves, at their circumstances, and at the idiosyncrasies of life in a constructive way. This type of humor is a coping mechanism to help an individual look at the bright side of all situations – good or bad. They feel that the glass is always half full (not half empty), and that every cloud has a silver lining. They tend not to be depressed, and they promote creativity in the workplace. They are optimistic and have high levels of self-esteem. Self-Enhancing Humor is like Affiliative Humor, but is more subtle and less assertive.
3. **Aggressive Humor** includes sarcasm, put-downs, heavy teasing, criticism, ridicule, and cynicism, all techniques used in Aggressive Humor. People who use Aggressive Humor don't care what effect it has on other people. In fact, sometimes the underlying intent is to harm or belittle others. People who use aggressive humor tend to have prejudices such as racism or sexism. They also tend to have neurotic tendencies, and to be disagreeable, contentious, hostile, and aggressive. Men tend to use aggressive humor more than women do.
4. **Self-Defeating Humor** is detrimental humor that people use towards themselves in order to gain approval from others. People who use this type of humor often laugh at their own expense, and please others by being the “butt” of their jokes. This humor is used as a self-defense mechanism for hiding the negative feelings that some people may have about themselves. People who use this type of humor are often depressed, and sometimes a bit neurotic and anxious. They tend to have low levels of self-esteem.

We can see examples of all these kinds of humor in *The Simpsons*, which is an American animated sitcom created by Matt Groening for the Fox Broadcasting Company. It is a television comedy about a dysfunctional working-class family who live in the imagined town of Springfield and whose members include Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa, and Maggie. Since 1989, there have been over 600 episodes of the show. One summer when we moved to a new town to go to

summer school, we were amused when some of the townspeople proudly showed us their new elementary school. The teachers and the parents had decided to let the children choose the name for their new school. The children chose *Springfield*, and only after it was announced in news stories did the adults of the town realize that the students were honoring the name of the Simpsons' school. A quick change was being made before the school was scheduled to open in the Fall.

Alan Brown and Chris Logan are the editors of an anthology entitled *The Psychology of the Simpsons: D'oh!* (2006). The cover of the book features a diagram of Homer Simpson's brain, which consists of the following sections: do-nuts, Marge, beer, naps, sex, pork chops, more beer, Moe's, TV, Stupid Flanders, Temporarily Out of Service, and Kwik-e Mart. The book includes pieces from twenty-nine contributors, including psychologists, counselors, teachers, and school therapists. It deals with such subjects as alcohol abuse, relationships, self-esteem, sex, gender, and personality. Psychological fields that are represented include Clinical Psychology, Cognition, Abnormal Psychology, Evolutionary Psychology, Gambling Addiction, Pavlovian Conditioning, and Family Therapy.

Denis McCarthy of the University of Missouri analyzes risk factors for alcoholism. McCarthy notes that Bart's passive-avoidance habit is a significant risk factor. He also suggests that Marge is at high risk for substance abuse because of her violent tendencies. Among the chapter titles are "Which One of Us is Truly Crazy?" and "Looking for Mr. Smarty Pants." Chris Logan says that "The book's content is very serious, but it's not presented in an overly serious way." *The Simpsons Archive* describes the book as a balance between humor and academia, adding, "Fortunately, despite numerous references to various psychological theories and academic studies, the essays steer clear of becoming too serious, and manage to stay entertaining throughout the book." The *Introduction* to the book includes the statement that once readers "Get past the goofy cover, with its illustration of Homer's beer- and TV-saturated brain" then they will "find analysis aimed at both TV viewers and students of psychology."

## Sarcasm

Because sarcasm is such an important personality trait, many psychologists and sociologists are studying this phenomenon. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines sarcasm as "a sharp, bitter, or cutting expression or remark; a bitter gibe or taunt." Sarcasm may or may not be ironic, and it may or may not be ambivalent. Sarcasm is a usually colloquial or spoken phenomenon, and is to be understood as meaning the opposite of what is stated. The indicators of sarcasm can be vocal inflection or context (often an absurd context).

The word “sarcasm” comes from the Greek “sarkasmós” from the verb “sarkázein” meaning “to tear flesh, bite the lip in rage, sneer.”

Sarcasm is a form of ridicule or mockery that tends to be harsh, cruel, and contemptuous and is often described as destructive. B. Brousfield writes that

*Sarcasm* is an insincere form of politeness which is used to offend one's interlocutor.

(*Contemporary Stylistics*, 2010)

John Haiman writes:

There is an extremely close connection between sarcasm and irony, and literary theorists in particular often treat sarcasm as simply the crudest and least interesting form of irony ... First, situations may be ironic, but only people can be sarcastic. Second, people may unintentionally be involved in ironic situations, but sarcasm requires intention. It is essential to sarcasm that the irony in the message is being intentionally used as a form of verbal aggression.

(*Talk is Cheap: Sarcasm, Alienation, and the Evolution of Language*, 1998)

Henry Watson Fowler writes:

Sarcasm does not necessarily involve irony. But irony, or the use of expressions conveying different things according to how they are interpreted, is often made the vehicle of sarcasm ... The essence of sarcasm is the intention of giving pain by (ironical or other) bitter words.

(*A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, 1950)

Most professionals in psychology and sociology view sarcasm negatively. They consider it to be a maladaptive coping mechanism for people with unresolved anger or frustrations. Clifford Lazarus describes sarcasm as “hostility disguised as humor.” Lazarus adds that too often the use of sarcasm tends to “overwhelm the emotional flavor of any conversation” (“Think Sarcasm is Funny? Think Again: Sarcasm is Really Just Hostility Disguised as Humor,” *Psychology Today*, 2012).

In *A Critique of Sarcastic Reason* (2012), William Brant says that adolescents often use sarcasm to test the borders of politeness and truth in conversations. Cues that a statement is sarcastic include the rolling of eyes, along with a sarcastic tone. In English the sarcastic tone is made by speaking more slowly and with a lower pitch. The Dutch, like the English, use a lowered pitch, but sometimes the expression is so low and quiet that it becomes a mumble. In contrast to English and Dutch, a sarcastic tone in Cantonese is indicated by raising the pitch of the voice. When sarcasm occurs in writing, it is sometimes indicated by a backwards question mark, by a “snark mark,” by a tilde, a bracketed exclamation point, a regular question mark, or “scare quotes.” Some of

these “scare quotes” require special computer software. Another indicator is the “Temherite Slag” – an inverted exclamation point. The “Sarcasm” entry in *Wikipedia* is concluded by a “See also” section which lists “Guilt, Hyperbole, Irony, Oxymoron, Paradox, Sardonicism, Smirk, Snarl, Sneer, Tongue-in-cheek, and Witticism.”

Brant considers sarcasm to be more sophisticated than lying, because children as young as age 3 are known to have created lies, but sarcasm is not seen until a much later age. In discussing the effects of sarcasm, Brant says:

(1) People can pretend to be insulted when they are not, or pretend not to be insulted when they are seriously offended; (2) An individual may feel ridiculed directly after the comment and then find it humorous or neutral thereafter; and (3) The individual may not feel insulted until years after the comment was expressed and considered.

People who have certain forms of brain damage, including dementia, autism, or Alzheimer’s, have difficulty understanding sarcasm. Richard Delmonico says that research shows that people with damaged prefrontal cortexes have difficulty understanding non-verbal clues such as tone (“Understanding Sarcasm as a Complex Business,” *New Scientist*, 2012).

### **Cruel Practical Joking**

One of the points that our Honors Students made in their “Humor across the Disciplines” class was that they resented people tricking them by hiding somewhere watching them at the same time that they call them on the telephone. They say that “It’s too tempting for people to play tricks – like you say you’re just going to bed, and then the person texts, ‘Look to your right, at the table under the big painting, and you will see me waving.’”

One student told us that her father texts her just to check on her. He says, “Everything OK?” When she answers “Yes,” he texts back to say “How do I know this is you and not the kidnapper?” She says it makes her laugh, but still it is so different from anything she would think of saying when communicating with a family member.

Probably because digital communication can be so powerful, most of us steer clear of using it for tricks, but one of our students described what he calls “Facebook creeping,” which refers to doing recon work before even being introduced to someone. He says it is fairly common. An initial conversation might go like this:

SCOTT: So where are you from?

KATE: California.

SCOTT: Me too! What part? . . . etc.

Little does Kate know, Scott had been doing some Facebook creeping and knew not only that Kate was from California, but exactly which town, which high school, and which sports team she was on. This type of information allows the creeper to be strategic while attempting to make connections, but it also requires good acting skills, because potential friends usually don't like the idea of having been "spied on."

Our class finished fairly early in December of 2012, and we were sorry to have missed out on hearing what the students would have said about two "jokes" – really hoaxes – that went terribly awry. First, there was a hoax about Notre Dame football player Manti Te'o, whose home was in Hawaii. He was set up by an old "friend" to think that he had an online girlfriend. We wanted the students to tell us what they thought about the hoax that had been going on for something like two years. A "friend" back in Hawaii had staged the girlfriend's death from leukemia as a way of bringing closure to something that had started as "a joke" and then gotten way out of hand. It is unclear just when Manti Te'o found out that he had been tricked, but it wasn't until January of 2013 when he was a finalist for the Heisman trophy that the Notre Dame football coaches felt it necessary to let the public know that Manti's girlfriend, whose death had supposedly inspired his wonderful playing during the Fall season, had been only a figment of someone's imagination.

The other more tragic incident took place in the second week of December in 2012. It was the suicide of British nurse Jacintha Saldanha, who had been fooled by two Australian radio DJs pretending to be Queen Elizabeth and Prince Charles. While the DJs were on air, they placed a call to the King Edward VII Hospital in London where the pregnant wife of Prince William, Catherine (Kate Middleton), was being treated for severe morning sickness. The DJs, Mel Greig and Michael Christian, used an exaggerated British accent and, afterwards, said it was done with "light-hearted" intentions. When Saldanha, the nurse who answered the call, put it through to the ward where Catherine was being treated, the two had to think quickly about what to say because they had not expected the call to go through. Saldanha was made to look foolish all around the world, and even after the tragedy of her death by suicide, the DJs continued to tweet about what they called "the Royal prank," until they were reprimanded both in social media and by their station managers.

When our school began again in mid-January, and we started meeting with our student research assistant, Kevin Riser, we asked what he and his friends were saying about these two incidents. He looked a little puzzled and then explained that in today's digital age these stories were by now "old news" and so he hadn't heard anyone discussing them. Then, as an after-thought, he added that "Maybe no one was talking about them because they were more tragic than funny."



### Points of Departure

1. Especially in relation to Health Psychology, the use and appreciation of humor has been found to help people manage their lives and to facilitate positive attitudes and a good balance of body chemistry. Yet statistics show that, on average, professional comedians die at a younger age than do people who have made their living in other ways. Think about the everyday lives of professional comedians, and see if you can give two or three examples of the kinds of stress that might take a toll on their own health, even though their chosen work is to bring humor and health to other people.
2. One of the things that health psychologists have discovered is that when people are presented with two or three philosophical observations, i.e. one-liners, they are more likely to remember the humorous one than the others. Perhaps you could try doing an experiment in your class, where you use an overhead projector to show a few one-liners, each on a separate slide. They should be of similar style and length, and you should be careful to leave each one visible for the same number of seconds – something like ten seconds. One of them should be humorous, while the others are serious and factual. Be careful to keep each one on the screen for the exact same time. Then two or three days later, ask your fellow students to write from memory the one-liners that you presented. If your class is typical, more students will be able to remember the humorous quote than the others.
3. If you have a younger brother or sister or if you are acquainted with some other child younger than the age of 6, see what you can observe about the child's use and understanding of humor. Maybe you can talk with the child's parents and get a report on what kind of jokes the child likes or if the child has ever made a joke. We have seen children go through the motions of a joke or of telling a riddle. They end with a big fake laugh and then seem disappointed that we haven't also laughed. We are still trying to figure out how we should react. How do you react to such "joking"?

Religious humor is tied in some way to the service and worship of God or the supernatural. Because it is full of mystery and ambiguity, it allows people to transcend their everyday concerns. Philosopher Joseph Campbell has noted that the chief difference between what in Western culture is viewed as religion and what is viewed as mythology is that with myths people feel free to create and enjoy humor, while with religion most people have ambivalent feelings and aren't quite sure what territory is permissible for joking.

Nevertheless, as it has become easier to communicate with both friends and strangers, especially online, we are seeing many more people making jokes that in different ways relate to religion. Here in southern Arizona, where we never see snow, we were truly amused to see a forwarded photo of the sign in front of the "First Baptist Church" from somewhere in the upper Midwest. Snow was piled on the top of the sign as well as on nearby tree branches, while the only pedestrian in the photo appeared to be walking through snow almost up to her knees. The sign read:

WHOEVER IS  
PRAYING FOR SNOW  
PLEASE STOP.

Other amusing posts that we have recently received include a photo of a cat walking calmly on what must have been a sidewalk even though a recent rain-storm had made it look like a stream. The caption was:

JESUS CAT  
HAS NO INTEREST IN  
PHYSICS.

We also like to tell students about Yuri Nikulin's favorite joke. He was known as the "Russian Charlie Chaplin," and when he died in 1997, the *New York Times* recounted this joke as part of his obituary. It is about an American actor who complains bitterly to his New York tailor.

"God needed only seven days to create the universe and it took you 30 days to make a pair of trousers!"

"Yes," answered the tailor, "But look at the world, and then look at the trousers!"

A couple of other "quickie" cartoons that made us smile include a drawing of the "Holy Bible" under a sign reading "Spoiler Alert" and then the message, "Jesus Dies on Page 681." The other cartoon shows an elegant-looking traveler from the last century who is explaining why "There is a stairway to Heaven, but a Highway to hell." The answer of course, is that "There are obviously more people going to Hell."

In Genesis 17:16, God tells Abraham, who is aged 99, that he and his elderly wife Sarah would have a son. In Genesis 17:17, we read that when Abraham heard this news, he "fell on his face and laughed." On hearing the news, Sarah also laughed with disbelief and when God confronted her, she compounded her foolishness by denying that she had laughed. When the son was born, his parents named him Itzhak (Isaac), which in Hebrew means, "I laugh."

A more serious and complicated story about a cartoon began in the mid-1990s, when cartoonist Doug Marlette pictured the Pope wearing a "No Women Priests" button. He drew an arrow pointing to the Pope's head and quoted the scripture from Matthew 16:18, "Upon this rock I will build My Church." The newspaper received so many protests that the editors devoted their June 18, 1994 "Viewpoints" page to the matter. Francis J. Maniscalco, director of the Office for Media Relations of the United States Catholic Conference, held the view that of course editorial cartoons are not expected to give both sides of an argument: "A well-balanced cartoon is probably by definition a boring and forgettable one." But on the other hand, people have limits on what can be treated irreverently: "For religious people, especially off-limits is all we have been taught to hold sacred. The sacred is really another realm. It is not the realm of health-care reform, or China policy, or defensive cigarette manufacturers, or any other mundane matter, as important as it may be in its own right." Marlette's argument was that:

The Catholic Church I know is big enough and secure enough to laugh at this cartoon .... I have drawn cartoons of this Pope for years. I have drawn positive cartoons when he was standing courageously toe-to-toe against Communism's Evil Empire, and I have drawn cartoons critical of him for his positions on population control and women priests. It is not disrespectful to satirize and criticize. On the contrary, satire shows true respect because it takes seriously public figures and the stands they take.

In virtually all cultures, religion plays a role in the philosophically important events of life, as with births, weddings, funerals, and the establishment and promotion of cultural beliefs and values. We know that people take these events seriously, but if we look a little harder we can see that the parts of our lives that we take seriously are the same parts of our lives that inspire humor.

For example, to check out the idea that weddings and funerals are among the most important events of our lives, we went online and found thirty-nine humorous cartoons about weddings. We did a quick count of the characters in the cartoons, and found that of course the bride and groom were pictured in virtually all of them, and that a priest, a Reverend, or some other clearly defined “Man of the Cloth,” was shown in eighteen (nearly half) of the cartoons, which illustrates the importance of religion in relation to marriage.

When we found twenty-two cartoons about death, we were surprised that we did not see pictures that were obviously of priests or chaplains. However, religion was nevertheless involved in big ways because eight of the cartoons (more than one-third) included “Angels,” with two of them being “Angels of Death” as shown by their black robes and the harvesting scythes they carried. Two “earthly” men were wearing suits and standing near hospital file cabinets. They looked “wise,” but weren’t exactly doing anything. We decided they must be doctors and that the cartoons were perhaps a “jab” at their passivity. Because doctors are at the top of the “prestige ladder,” they are often the butt of “hospital humor.”

Three visitors were shown standing or sitting by the beds of sick or dying patients; it was not clear they were representatives of a religion, but they might have been. One of them was reading a *Book of Fairy Tales* to a dying patient. We thought this cartoon was probably meant as a “slam” against religious people who “over-promise.” We were surprised to see that three of the cartoons (one-third of the sample) were about fortune-tellers who were easy to identify because they were looking into crystal balls. In the funniest one, the patient was a Gingerbread Man, and the fortune-teller was explaining to him that in his previous life he had been a bowl of shortening mixed with flour, sugar, and baking powder.

Way back in 1678, when John Bunyan wrote his *Pilgrim’s Progress*, he designed aptronyms, which are words that both identify and describe a person’s characteristics. The people in his story who subscribed to the “Comic Vision” of life included Christian, Mr. Honest, Mr. Great Heart, Faithful, and maybe Madam Bubble and Mrs. Bats-Eyes. Those who subscribed to the “Tragic Vision” of life included Giant Despair, Mr. Money Love, Mr. Despondency, Giant Grim, and perhaps Mr. Brisk.

Modern Tibetan Buddhism stresses laughter and open-mindedness. When John Cleese asked the Dalai Lama why in Tibetan Buddhism people laugh so much, he responded that laughter is very helpful to him in teaching and in political negotiations because when people laugh, it is easier for them to admit new ideas to their minds. John Morreall writes that Zen masters use “koans” to break people’s attachments to incongruities, for example, “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” He adds that “The most comic vision among traditional

religions is in Zen Buddhism and Taoism, while the most tragic vision is in certain forms of Judaism and Calvinist Christianity.”

Here are some examples of ancient religious groups espousing the tragic vision. The Essenes, an early Jewish monastic group, imposed a penance of thirty days for those who “guffawed foolishly.” The monastery of Columban in Ireland assigned the following punishments: “He who smiles in the service ... six strokes; if he breaks out in the noise of laughter, a special fast unless it has happened pardonably.” Also, the Missionary Sisters of Columban compared their work and their values with those of the monks.

Traditional Jews are still viewed as serious people, which may relate to their reputation of having a serious sense of humor. In 1978, psychologist Samuel Janus conducted a study which found that although Jews constituted only 3 percent of the US population, 80 percent of the nation’s professional comedians were Jewish. That percentage is much less today, not because there are fewer Jewish comedians, but because in response to ethnic and gender identity movements, many new comedians have come from groups that were previously under-represented.

Actually, Jews are not so much interested in answers as they are interested in deeper insights. In the Rabbinic tradition of the *Pilpul*, for example, the Rabbi will seldom accept an answer to his question as final. Jews often answer a question not with an answer, but with another question, in hope of gaining deeper understandings and knowledge about the ironies and paradoxes of life. Dolf Zillman says that Jewish humor exhibits two antithetical statures: disparagement and superiority. Mel Brooks’ 1968 film *The Producers* exhibits these two statures, as does this recent Jewish joke:

Here is a newsletter report of how a pastor, of the optimistic or joyful philosophy, dealt with the effects of a severe windstorm that damaged the roof of his congregation’s church building. At least \$4,000 was needed for repairs, so on the first Sunday after the storm, the Pastor stood up and announced: “Unfortunately the recent storm damaged the church roof and \$4,000 is needed to pay for the repairs. Fortunately, the money is available. But unfortunately it is at the moment scattered through the church in the pockets of the members.”

Apparently, the scheme worked, or it would not have been published in the church’s newsletter. Now that many people have computers and printers at home, as well as access to relatively inexpensive copy machines, the printing of church programs and weekly or monthly newsletters or bulletins has become a popular way to bring church congregations together, even if they live in houses and apartments scattered throughout large metropolitan areas. A complication to the matter is that the people who do this kind of work for their church are not professional journalists or secretaries, and because of all the other duties they have in life, they often leave the task until just before the

church services so at the last minute they are rushing off to the local copy center without careful proofreading. The result is a new kind of humor which you can find online under such headings as “Church Bulletin Bloopers” or “To Err Is Human ...” Of course the creator of this second title assumed that any religious person would be able to finish it with “... But to Forgive Is Divine.”

Here are a few examples of sentences from church announcements that, in our English teacher mode, we would mark as “AMB” for “ambiguous,” or if we were in a good mood, perhaps we would draw a smiley face.

- Seven new choir robes are currently needed, due to the addition of several new members and to the deterioration of some older ones.
- For those of you who have children and don't know it, we have a nursery downstairs.
- Miss Janet Mackovitch sang, “I Will Not Pass This Way Again,” giving obvious pleasure to the congregation.
- The peacemaking meeting scheduled for today has been cancelled due to a conflict.
- At the going-away party for the pastor, the congregation was anxious to give him a little momentum.
- The ladies of the Church have cast off clothing of every kind. They may be seen in the basement on Friday afternoon.
- Weight Watchers will meet at 7 pm at the First Presbyterian Church. Please use the large double door at the side entrance.
- The cost for attending our PRAYER and FASTING conference includes meals.

In relation to this new kind of humor, we began wondering if there are really more mistakes made in this genre than in other non-commercial messages, or if it is just that at church, people have free time to read the bulletin over and over and therefore are more likely to find whatever errors exist.

At the national level, *The Joyful Noiseletter*, which gets its name from Psalms 98:4, “Make a joyful noise to the Lord,” has a thirty-year history of bringing reproducible cartoons, clean jokes, one-liners, inspirational stories, and joyful Scripture references to its subscribers. More information can be found at <https://www.joyfulnoiseletter.com>. The newsletter was founded more than thirty years ago by Cal Samra, who wrote *The Joyful Christ: The Healing Power of Humor*, which by now has sold nearly a million copies. The success of the book gave him the energy to start the newsletter when people began writing to him with stories about funny things they had witnessed or jokes they had heard or created. Among its most appreciated features was a section on “Jokes Pastors Can Tell” and one on “God’s Kids Say and Do the Funniest Things.” There are no advertisements in today’s newsletter, but there is a charge to subscribers who want to continue after reading the online sample.

Some of the Biblical references to laughter are associated with hostility or sadness; however, in a surprisingly large number of incidents, laughter is associated with joy and gratitude. For example, “When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongues with shouts of joy” (Psalms 126:2). In another incident, Jesus says, “Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh” (Luke 6:21), and in Proverbs 17:22, we are told “A merry heart is a good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones.”

Religious humor is sometimes part of a politician’s identity. In the 2008 primary Presidential election, Mike Huckabee frequently made jokes or allusions related to stories in the Bible. He hoped they would help his conservative base identify with him. But after one of his rallies, when a couple of National Public Radio reporters interviewed people as they were leaving, they found that only one of a dozen people they talked to was able to explain the connection that Huckabee was trying to make between the Bible messages and his political beliefs. Nevertheless, all of those who were questioned recognized the stories as “Biblical,” and concluded that Huckabee was a religious person. When Huckabee was later told that it was almost a statistical impossibility that he could get the Republican nomination, he replied, “I didn’t major in math. I majored in miracles.”

Matters of religion are often used for group identity. For example, long ago both of us graduated from Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah and we still remember a cartoon that appeared in the student newspaper. It showed a bloodied and battered student rising from a pile of stones that had been thrown at him. As a campus police officer comes up, the student explains, “All I said was ‘Let he who is without sin, cast the first stone.’”

Since the cartoon appeared in the Brigham Young University newspaper, we can assume that it was sending a message to all of us current students telling us not to be so “self-righteous.” But if the same cartoon had appeared in the student newspaper at the University of Utah in Salt Lake, the message would have been quite different in pointing to the idea that Mormon students think their moral behavior is superior to that of other people. When we first saw this cartoon, we each remembered a similar joke that we had heard from our Sunday school teachers when we were children (Alleen in Arizona and Don in Utah). It was about St. Peter taking visitors around Heaven and telling them to tiptoe past the room where the Mormons are. “Why?” “Because they think they’re the only ones here.”

### **Accidental Religious Humor from Children**

Alleen’s first college teaching job was in the Library Science Department at Arizona State University, where one of her colleagues happened to be named



John Vergis. When we were talking to him and his wife at the department's Christmas party, he happened to mention that he had started his career as an elementary school teacher. We asked him what the hardest part of that job was, and before he could answer his wife chimed in to tell us about the time he was in charge of the children's Christmas program. It was one of the biggest surprises of her life when at the grand finale of the program, something like 100 solemn children (ages 5 to 9) stood in front of their parents and grandparents and sang the old Christmas carol of "Silent Night, Holy Night." What surprised her was that instead of singing "... round yon Virgin," they all sang "round John Vergis."

We laughed while asking him if the children had sung it that way during the rehearsals. He sheepishly nodded his head and then explained that he hadn't corrected them because he didn't know how to explain to such young children what a virgin was. Besides "round John Vergis" made sense to them, because there they were standing around their music teacher who they knew was named *John Vergis*.

This kind of mistake is officially known as a *mondegreen*, which is a relatively new word added to the *Random House Webster's College Dictionary*, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and the *Merriam-Webster's College Dictionary* in 2000. However, the word was invented back in the 1950s when Sylvia Wright wrote an article published in the November 1954 *Harper's* in which she told how when she was a child her mother often read aloud to her from *Percy's Reliques*. She was especially touched by the seventeenth-century Scottish ballad "The Bonnie Earl O' Moray," which includes this stanza:

Ye Highlands and ye Lowlands,  
Oh, where hae ye been?  
They hae slain the Earl O'Moray,  
And laid him on the green.

Sylvia was not accustomed to the Scottish vocabulary and the dialect, so in making the best sense she could of the final line, she thought it was:

They hae slain the Earl O'Moray,  
and *Lady Mondegreen*.

In her mind, she had pictured the bonny Earl holding the beautiful Lady Mondegreen's hand, while they both bled profusely but were faithful and loving until the very end. When Sandra came back and read the ballad as an adult, she felt cheated because what she had imagined was so much more vivid and romantic than what the poet actually intended. She began looking for similar kinds of misunderstandings, which she decided to call *mondegreens*, in honor of her first experience with *Lady Mondegreen*.

Two of the other examples that she put in her article were, "Surely Good Mrs. Murphy," for the beginning of the Biblical verse in *Psalms* 23 which

actually reads. “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,” and “Haffely, Gaffely, Gaffely, Gonward ...” for the beginning of Alfred Lord Tennyson’s famous 1854 poem *Charge of the Light Brigade*, which actually reads, “Half a league, half a league, half a league onwards.”

We decided to include the subject of mondegreens in this chapter on religion because so many mondegreens originate in relation to children and their attendance at churches or listening to Christmas carols on television or even singing them at home where older children’s voices drown out the “mistakes” their younger siblings are making. Because these songs are only sung at Christmas, children can sing the same old mondegreens for years – at least until someone corrects them or they are old enough to read the words and then ask for help in understanding the meanings. Here are fairly common mondegreens with the adult’s version on the left and the child’s version on the right:

The Acts of the Apostles	→	The axe of the Apostles
David playing the lyre	→	David playing the liar
Gladly the cross I bear	→	Gladly the cross-eyed bear.
Of thee I sing	→	Of the icing
Born is the King of Israel	→	Barneys’ the King of Israel
Glory to the newborn King	→	Glory to the New York King

Our niece, Holly Hancock, who has an adorable young family, wrote and told us about how her children invented their own mondegreens. When Capri was a baby, 2-year-old Chloe would use a cute, high-pitched “motherly sounding” voice and would lean over the baby’s crib and say “You are Sooooo a-Terrible!” After a couple of months of this, they realized that Chloe thought she was saying “You are Soooooo Adorable.”

Holly has a sister named Oni, and when Malcolm, their oldest boy, was about 4 years old, he wanted the family to sing “Oni’s Song.” Holly didn’t know what he meant and so she asked him to sing it first. He sang, “Old MacDonald had a farm, ee-ii-ee-ii-o. And *Oni’s farm* he had a cow...”

Holly was thrilled to learn that her children weren’t making mistakes. Instead, they were creating original *mondegreens*.

Linguists call the process “reanalysis” because the listener mishears a phrase and in trying to make sense of it re-analyzes it. A good example is how after a speaker had come to a high school and given an informative lecture about the “Pulitzer Prize,” a student who lived on a farm and consequently was familiar with chickens, wrote his report on the event which he entitled “Pullet Surprises.”

Church leaders, pastors, preachers, and other religious officials seldom tell the kinds of jokes that we hear from comedians on television. However, even

Pope John XXIII made a worthy television joke when he was in front of a crowd and a newspaper reporter asked him “How many people work in the Vatican?” Without blinking an eye, he responded “About half.”

The kind of “church humor” that is more common consists of anecdotes that people tell about their families, their neighbors, or one of their friends. It is easier to keep one’s dignity, which is important to religious leaders, if they do not look and sound like they are trying too hard to get a laugh, yet most modern congregations appreciate hearing something that makes them smile, or on occasion even laugh. We recently heard a Sunday School teacher confide that his grandson had just taught him that the letters B-I-B-L-E stand for “Basic Information Before Leaving Earth.” We aren’t sure the man even has a grandson, but we nevertheless appreciated the efficiency with which he shared his little joke.

The same goes for a young woman who said that when she was waiting to mail something in line at the post office, an older woman in front of her confided that she was mailing the third-generation family Bible to her younger brother so that when she died it would still be in the family. When the clerk took the package, he asked the elderly woman if it contained “anything breakable.” To the amusement of the other people standing in line, she responded, “Only the Ten Commandments.”

### **Humor to Relieve Mild Religious Stress**

When the two of us, along with our three children (ages 4 through 9) lived in Afghanistan between 1969 and 1971, we heard several humorous stories about a fictional Mullah Nasruddin. From the stories and from the grins and the smiles that we saw on the faces of the people who told us the stories, we sensed a modest level of tension between the local people and their religious leaders. A key requisite for countries in a theocracy is that the religious leaders are in control, i.e. they are the “bosses” for both the civil and the religious laws. Now that the country is engaged in an ongoing war with a much harsher group of Muslim leaders, we wonder if these old folktales are still being told when the tension is so high.

When we were there, we heard the stories about Mullah Nasruddin both from the Afghans we worked with and from other “foreigners” like us, who were in the country as teachers, Peace Corps volunteers, embassy support staff, or workers providing various kinds of help from such countries as England, Russia, Germany, and the US. This interesting mix of Afghans and “foreigners” led to some unusual situations. For example, all of us went to work on Mondays through Thursdays, then we had Friday off for Muslim religious duties, which for the Afghans included going to the mosque to hear a sermon from their Mullah. Then we went back to work on Saturday, and a day later had Sunday off so that the “foreigners,” i.e. the Christians, could observe their religious

duties. When we came home and Alleen told some of the stories to her children's literature class, a foreign student from another Muslim country brought in a colorful little book of stories about Mullah Nasruddin, so we know he is "bigger" than just Afghanistan. When we looked him up online, we learned that he has been around for some 500 years and is a native of Turkey, where he is called Nasreddin Hodja, meaning that he has been on the religious pilgrimage to Mecca. In Turkey, the custom has been to hold a summer festival in his honor between July 5 and 10, while in Afghanistan he was remembered all year long.

In one of the more mundane stories about him, an Afghan farmer discovers the Mullah out in his watermelon patch putting ripe melons into a gunny sack. The farmer angrily asks "Why are you stealing my melons?" The Mullah looked surprised as he explained that he was only "putting them into a gunny sack so they wouldn't blow away." Neither we nor our students were amused at this story, but we did appreciate the story about how one evening the Mullah and his wife sat down for supper. The Mullah saw something moving near his garden. He grabbed his gun and shot toward the garden. When he ran out to see what he had shot, he discovered that his wife had washed his best shirt and had hung it on a tree to dry. Just then, she came running from the house. "You unlucky man!" she cried. "You have ruined your best shirt!" "Oh no," said the Mullah. "I am the luckiest man in town. I was almost ready to wear that shirt today. Just think! I would have killed myself!"

The most complicated story that we heard about the Mullah was set on a dark night when he was crossing a neighborhood street and fell into a deep hole that had been left by careless construction workers. Of course he called out for help, and people gathered around, expressing their sympathy. A neighbor leaned over the hole, and while stretching out his arm said, "Here! Give me your hand and I will pull you up!" The Mullah didn't answer, but just sat there at the bottom of the hole. Another neighbor came and asked if the Mullah was hurt. When he shook his head, that neighbor also asked the Mullah to reach up and give the man his hand, but nothing happened. Then the oldest and wisest man in the village came up and knelt by the hole. He reached out his hand and calmly said to the Mullah, "Here, Mullah. Take my hand and I will pull you out." There was immediate action on the part of the Mullah, who took the man's hand and calmly allowed the wise old man to pull him up. After the Mullah had walked away, his rescuer smiled and explained to all the surprised neighbors that "Mullahs are used to *taking*, not *giving*."

Our other favorite story about Mullah Nasruddin was how on one Friday morning he hadn't bothered to prepare his weekly sermon, and so while walking to the mosque he came up with an idea. He stood in front of the people and asked, "How many of you know what I am going to say today?" Of course no one stood up or raised a hand and so the Mullah stepped down while explaining, "I can't waste my time on such 'know nothings!' Go home and think about this and then come back next Friday."

Of course the Mullah was so relieved that he didn't give any more thought to his obligation until the next Friday. And sure enough, while he was walking to the mosque, he had another idea. When the time came, he stood in front of the congregation and asked, "How many of you know what I'm going to say?" When everyone raised their hands, he smilingly explained, "Good ... Then I won't need to say it," and he calmly left.

Of course something similar happened on the third Friday, but the people had gotten together and tried to figure out how to keep him from cheating them again. Half of them raised their hands while the other half did not. His response was "Wonderful! The half of you who know can tell the half of you who don't know!" and away he went.

We never heard what happened on the next Friday.

### **Expanding Ecumenical Considerations**

Christmas is the biggest religious holiday that United States families celebrate, with Easter – or maybe Halloween – coming in second. All three of these holidays have their beginnings in the beliefs and institutions of Christianity, so much so that non-Christians sometimes feel left out. To help people be aware of holidays other than "their own," we noticed that last Christmas an "Interfaith Calendar" was advertised for sale, showing the primary sacred times for world religions, including Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Baha'i, Zoroastrianism, Sikhism, Shinto, Jainism, Confucianism, Daoism, and Native American religions. We were surprised not to see The Day of the Dead on the list, which is celebrated by local Hispanics, as well as by people living in Mexico and South America.

One of the things which, since our childhood, has changed about these big holidays is that most Americans are aware that with the many cultures now represented in the United States, religiously oriented holidays happen at different times for different people. This past November and December, we saw that as merchants were beginning to set out their decorations and their Christmas-oriented merchandise, they included greeting cards wishing people a "Happy CHRISTMAHANAKWANZIKA." We also saw a sign that read:

If you are Jewish, feel free to wish me a  
"Happy Hanukkah."

If you are Christian, you can wish me a  
"Merry Christmas."

If you're African-American/Canadian,  
wish me a  
"Joyous Kwanzaa."

If you have no affiliation,  
You can still wish me  
"Happy Holidays."

I promise not to be offended!  
 I will be thankful that you care enough  
 To wish me well ...

### Points of Departure

1. After people noticed how surprising and funny many children's *mondegreens* were, they began creating their own as jokes. Of the following mondegreens, which ones do you think are "genuine" mistakes and which ones were created by adults as jokes? Of course there's no way for us to "prove" their origins, but at least we can probably decide which revised versions contain low-frequency vocabulary items that children are unlikely to know, as with the first three which are altered lines from "The Twelve Days of Christmas":  
 "Nine ladies dancing" → "Nine lazy Hansons"  
 "Six geese a-laying" → "Six geezers laying"  
 "And a partridge in a pear tree" → "And a paltry tin-affair tree"  
 "Ten lords a-leaping" → "Ten lawyers leaving.
2. Try to think of a joke that you have heard at a religious meeting or at a funeral. Tell the joke to the class and talk about what information listeners needed to know about the religion to appreciate the joke. For example, does it assume there is an afterlife or that people in Heaven can communicate with people on Earth, or that animals and people have the same kinds of thinking?
3. At the University of Michigan, a class was listed in the schedule under the title "Comedy in Catholic Contexts." The Board of Regents questioned the class and called for the professor to explain its purpose. He assured the Board that it was not a class designed to make fun of the Church. Instead, he said, it would simply illustrate how "shared values and assumptions define a community that will get the joke." He explained that such features as a celibate clergy, a hierarchical structure, elaborate rituals, and traditional values "invite opposition, heresy, rebellion, reforms, protest, and satire." He thought the class would simply illustrate how "shared values and assumptions define a community that will get the joke." The literature being studied ranged from Boccaccio's fourteenth-century *Decameron* to works by twentieth-century authors including Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and Frank O'Connor. What do you think about the professor's explanation? Does it reveal some of the challenges in such cross-disciplinary fields as humor studies and religious studies?

In Rhetoric and Composition courses, most teachers consider ambiguous sentences to be bad, because they are errors. But in Literature courses, teachers tell students that puns and double-entendre are good, because they are rhetorical devices. But doubting students ask “Aren’t ‘ambiguity’ and ‘double-entendre’ the same thing?”

No, they are not at all the same thing, because ambiguity is unintentional and sloppy, and because the ambiguity is not doing what the author wants it to do, i.e. impress the teacher and earn a good grade. Double-entendre, on the other hand, is intentional. It is a rhetorical device, and it is doing what the author wants it to do by amusing the audience, advancing the plot, and telling something about the person who is using the double-entendre. For example, playwright Oscar Hammerstein told how he used to work in a cigar factory where he learned something about both plays and cigars: “If it’s good, everybody wants a box, and if it’s bad, no amount of puffing will make it draw.”

Similarly, clichés and trite expressions are bad, but idiomatic expressions can be good. For example, even though you are not an acrobat or an infant, you can “put your foot in your mouth,” and if someone has “two left feet,” we don’t order him special shoes; we give him dance lessons. And if someone “kicks the bucket,” we are more likely to head for the funeral home than the mop closet.

Confusion and chaos in writing are bad, but enigma, irony, and paradox can be good. Aesop tells about a traveler who sought refuge with a satyr on a very cold night. It was so cold that the stranger blew on his hands to make them warm. The next morning, the traveler was served some hot porridge, so he blew on it to make it cool. On seeing this, the satyr threw the traveler out of his home, because he wanted nothing to do with a man who could blow hot and cold with the same breath.

Nearly eighty American universities offer doctoral level work in rhetoric, which today is often combined with the study of composition. It is one of the oldest areas of academic endeavor, going back in Mesopotamia to over 2000 BC. In ancient Egypt it was studied and practiced in the Middle Kingdom period



(2080–1640 BC) where the ability to speak with eloquence and clarity was highly valued, as was knowing when not to speak and how to balance eloquence with wise silence. The generally accepted idea was for speakers to support, rather than question, social norms.

In China, the philosopher Confucius (551–479 BC) also valued eloquence in speaking, while in ancient Greece, Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* featured such heroes as Achilles, Hector, Jason, and Odysseus who were known for their abilities to give wise counsel to their followers.

### **Ethos, Pathos, and Logos – Tough, Sweet, and Stuffy**

Today, rhetoric is the subject at most universities where students study language-related symbols and how they are used to communicate particular values as outlined and named in these three categories by Aristotle:

**Logos** is the divine wisdom manifest in the creation, government, and redemption of the world. Modern related words include *logic* and *logical*.

**Pathos** is an element in experience or in artistic representation evoking pity or sadness. Modern related words include *pity* and *pathetic*.

**Ethos** is the distinguishing character, sentiment, moral nature, or guiding beliefs of a person, group, or institution. Modern related words include *ethics* and *ethical*.

Aristotle was the Greek Philosopher who first established the field of “Rhetoric.” Aristotle was interested in Argument, but he was even more interested in Persuasion (Effective Argument). Aristotle had to be aware of his audience, and he also had to be aware of the relationship of the text to the audience. He therefore developed the notions of “Ethos,” “Pathos,” and “Logos,” which can be described as the First Person (I, me, we, us, our), the Second Person (you, your), and the Third Person (it, they, them, their) Points of view.

In his *Tough, Sweet and Stuffy: An Essay on Modern American Prose Styles* (1966), Walker Gibson translated Aristotle's “Ethos,” “Pathos,” and “Logos” into “Tough,” “Sweet,” and “Stuffy.” Gibson went on to explain that Tough language is the language of the novel, written from the point of view of the author, the protagonist, or the narrator. It's called Tough language because protagonists tend to be tough, and their language demonstrates their toughness. Tough language is also informal, colloquial, and vernacular and it is often humorous. Tough language is the language of intimacy. It is the language of the loosened tie and the rolled-up shirt sleeves, with no pretentious multi-syllable or low-frequency words. The writing is not planned, but just seems to happen, in a stream-of-consciousness way. The reader is made to feel he is part of the action. With Tough language, the historical-present tense is often used, so

rather than saying, “I saw a boulder in the road and I swerved into an oncoming bus,” the author would write “I see a boulder in the road and swerve into an oncoming bus.”

Sweet language is the language of the advertisement and the politician, written from the point of view of the audience, because Sweet language is intended to seduce the reader into buying something or voting for someone. Walker Gibson also uses the term “AROMA” for Sweet language. AROMA stands for *Advertising Rhetoric of Madison Avenue*. Sweet language is called “sweet” because it’s designed to please the audience. Sweet language is informal and subjective and sometimes funny. Sweet language is full of innovative spellings, creative grammar, and wild punctuation. Sweet writing contains many sentence fragments, and would rather flout a grammatical rule than conform to it. An example is “Winston tastes good, like a cigarette should. What do you want, good grammar, or good taste?”

When this commercial for Winston cigarettes was first developed, critics pointed out that it was “ungrammatical” because in formal English it should have read, “Winston tastes good, as a cigarette should.” However, the advertising company decided to go ahead with the way it was first written by their copywriter, and then to defend its “sweet” style with the question, “What do you want, good grammar, or good taste?” When we’ve talked about this particular usage in some of our classes, we’ve been surprised at how many students were unaware of the underlying argument that gave rise to the follow-up: *What do you want? Good Grammar or Good Taste?*

Sweet language is the language of diversion; it plays tricks on the reader with its puns, its word coinages, its humor, its packaging, its sexiness, and other aspects which have nothing to do with the product itself. Sweet language is also the language of sensationalism, the language of superlatives and hyperbole. Sweet language is filled with contractions, clippings, and blendings. Deletions abound, making it all the more cryptic and intimate. It is also filled with such slang expressions as “No doubt about it,” “Cut it out,” and “Where else?” It can even be cutesy, as in “Dry skin? Not me, darling. Every inch of little me is as smooth as (well, you know what).”

Another aspect of Sweet language is the noun-adjunct construction (a noun modified by another noun). This can be seen in such coinages as “speaker-phone,” “decorator colors,” or “supermarket selection.” At one time, the Bell Telephone Company praised the beauties of its “hands-free, group-talk, across-the-room telephone.”

While Tough language is *I*-oriented, and Sweet language is *you*-oriented, Stuffy language is *it*-oriented. Both Tough and Sweet language are sensual and emotional, while Stuffy language is aloof and objective. Stuffy language is the language of the laboratory experiment, the research paper, the dissertation, and the scholarly textbook. In other words, it is the language of academia

in general, which is called “stuffy.” Stuffy language is funny only when it is being made fun of, such as through the words of a pedantic or supercilious eccentric.

Stuffy language is highly grammatical and highly formal. The words and the sentences tend to be long and complex. Infinitives, gerunds, present and past participial constructions, nominative absolutes, perfect, progressive, and passive constructions are almost totally confined to this style of writing. First- and second-person pronouns are seldom allowed. Stuffy language is the language of limitations, restrictions, and qualifications, because the writer doesn't want to make claims beyond the evidence. Limiting (as opposed to descriptive) adjectives are frequent, as are prepositional phrases and relative clauses.

### Grice's Cooperative Principle

In his “Logic and Conversation” article which appeared in P. Cole and J. L. Morgan's *Syntax and Semantics* (1975), H. P. Grice proposed a system that can be used to describe an ideal conversation. He outlined these “Conversational Implicatures” that are needed for a cooperative conversation:

- I. Quantity
  - a. Be informative
  - b. Don't give more information than is required
- II. Quality
  - a. Don't lie or mislead
  - b. Don't make statements unless there is adequate evidence
- III. Relation
  - a. Be relevant
- IV. Manner
  - a. Avoid obscurity
  - b. Avoid ambiguity
  - c. Be succinct
  - d. Be orderly

If these Conversational Implicatures are adhered to, the result is Serious Communication. But when these Conversational Implicatures are violated, the result is often Humorous Communication. In terms of quantity, when a character in a novel gives too little information, that character is an Innocent (e.g. Huckleberry Finn or Bartleby the Scrivener). When a character gives too much information, he is a boor, like Ignatius Riley in *A Confederacy of Dunces*. Jacob Mey gives this example of the violation of quantity. Sara, Mey's 6-year-old daughter, is bouncing a ball, and it bounces away from her field of vision. Mey's friend says, “Why don't you look behind Volume 6 of Dostoyevski's *Collected Works*?”

This is giving a 6-year-old too much information because it is information that she won't understand. In a legitimate conversation, a more appropriate statement would have been something like, "It's behind one of those fat brown books in the middle of the bottom shelf."

Jacob Mey gives another example. A customer is buying some liquor, and the sales clerk asks, "You're over 21, aren't you?" The customer responds, "Well, er, yes," and then quickly adds, "My birthday was actually yesterday, and we're having a party tonight ...," at which point the sales clerk says, "May I see your ID?" Jacob Mey is illustrating what he calls a special rule for dealing with authorities: "If you want to be believed, do not give more information than you have been asked for."

Legitimate conversations must not only contain the right amount of information (neither too little nor too much), but the information must also be trusted. In bona fide conversations a person doesn't lie or mislead, and a person must not offer unsupported claims. But in a novel, the characters who follow these rules are dull and boring characters, while the characters who violate these rules are the fun characters. Lovers, like Casanova, Don Juan, and Humbert Humbert, along with the best characters in reality television, often lie or mislead not only in order to get what they want, but also in order to become popular and famous. The fox who eats the Gingerbread Man is a liar, as is the wolf in the Little Red Riding Hood story; but without these liars, there would be no story. Tom Sawyer also had to do some lying and misleading in order to get Aunt Polly's fence white-washed. Stories of heroes of the American Western Frontier are filled with hyperbole and exaggeration. The stories about Paul Bunyan, Pecos Bill, and Davey Crockett are all greatly exaggerated. That's what makes them good stories.

In *Spooky Southwest: Tales of Hauntings, Strange Happenings, and Other Local Lore* (2004), S. E. Schlosser tells a story about Pecos Bill and Slue-foot Sue. The story, which is told in an intimate colloquial style, explains that Pecos Bill had dozens of wives, but that his true love had been Slue-foot Sue. Pecos Bill first saw Slue-foot Sue riding a catfish down the Rio Grande River. She was standing up and holding on with only one hand, so that she could take potshots at the clouds with her six-shooter. Pecos Bill fell in love, proposed on the spot, and they were married the next day. Just after they were married, Slue-foot Sue wanted Pecos Bill to prove how much he loved her by letting her ride his horse, Widow-maker. Pecos Bill argued against it, but lost the argument.

The story continues: "Well, Widow-maker bucked like a maniac, just as you'd expect. Sue was thrown off – clear up to the clouds. Luckily, Sue was still wearing her springy hoop underskirt, so when she hit the ground, she bounced up again. But we all soon realized Sue couldn't stop bouncing. She bounced so high she kept hitting her head on the moon." She kept bouncing for four days and four nights, and Bill came to realize that she was going to starve to death before she stopped bouncing, so he had to shoot her. It was a crying

shame, and Pecos Bill felt really bad about it. He finally married again, and again, and again, but he never felt the same about any other woman as he had felt about Blue-foot Sue.

In *Pragmatics: An Introduction, 2nd Edition* (2001), Jacob Mey says that good authors always have something up their sleeves, and that they allow their writing to contain “deliberate omissions, misleading statements, uninformative or dishonest remarks and all sorts of narrative tricks in order to better develop the plot.”

Another conversational expectation that is often violated for dramatic effect is relevance. When Don Quixote lowers his lance and attacks a windmill, he thinks that he is fighting a battle against a huge and powerful enemy soldier. Don Quixote is an unreliable narrator. Some of the most memorable characters in all of literature are unreliable narrators. Examples include Colonel Robert Hogan in *Hogan's Heroes*, Randle McMurphy in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Amy in Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*, Mrs. De Winter in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (which later became an Alfred Hitchcock film), and Humbert Humbert in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. There were also unreliable narrators in Paula Hawkins' *The Girl on the Train*, and Edgar Allan Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*. C. S. Lewis wrote a novel entitled *The Screwtape Letters* in which every sentence was meant to be read with its opposite meaning.

In Yann Martel's *The Life of Pi*, the reader believes the story that Piscine Molitor Patel is telling until it becomes more and more incredible, and finally unbelievable. But then at the end of the book, the author (Yann Martel) gives the reader two possible endings and allows the reader to make the choice, but not really because the only way they would have gotten to the place in the book where they were offered the choice was to have already chosen “Option Two.”

Option One: the sensible and logical undramatic story, or

Option Two: the dramatic, incredible, and unbelievable story.

For regular discourse, most of us assume that it is straightforward, unambiguous, succinct, and orderly, but again, these notions are all violated for dramatic effect. In George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four*, the language of Newspeak is invented not in order to make things clear and unambiguous, but rather to make things obscure and uncertain – often reversing the meanings that the words usually convey. In George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, the animals (Snowball, Napoleon, and Squealer) come up with seven commandments:

1. Whatever goes upon two legs is an enemy.
2. Whatever goes upon four legs, or has wings, is a friend.
3. No animal shall wear clothes.
4. No animal shall sleep in a bed.
5. No animal shall drink alcohol.

6. No animal shall kill any other animal.
7. All animals are equal.

These commandments are distilled into the maxim “Four legs good, two legs bad!”

But as the animals “evolve,” the commandments also “evolve,” so that number 4 becomes “No animal shall sleep in a bed **with sheets**”; number 5 becomes “No animal shall drink alcohol **to excess**”; and number 6 becomes “No animal shall kill any other animal **without cause**.” And eventually, all of the commandments are replaced by two maxims: “All animals are equal **but some animals are more equal than others**,” and “Four legs good, **two legs better!**” as the pigs become more human.

The prophets and soothsayers and witches throughout literature would not be so interesting if their prophesies were clear or unambiguous. And the entire function of the Shaggy-Dog Story is to go off again and again on irrelevant tangents.

### Errors vs. Rhetorical Devices

Rhetoric and Composition teachers sometimes get together and share with other teachers the errors that their students have made in their research papers. As we have pondered on what makes this an enjoyable activity, we have decided first, that in fact there is a certain similarity between the student errors and the rhetorical devices, and second that the teachers are looking for ways to distinguish between an error and a rhetorical device.

Note that these are legitimate questions with legitimate answers. There are two reasons that teachers find student errors enjoyable. At one time, we undoubtedly made similar errors, but now we are educated and it feels good to spot the kinds of errors we used to make.

Also, we’ve graded a lot of research papers, and we’re tired, and so we deserve a little comic relief, so here is a beginning.

**QUESTION:** Is a student error similar to a rhetorical device?

**ANSWER:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** Since they are so similar, how is it possible to distinguish between an error and a rhetorical device?

**ANSWER:** Freshmen students make errors; great authors make rhetorical devices. And, no, we’re not being facetious. When the words in a freshman composition violate grammatical rules, or conversational implicatures, we assume that they are errors, because the purpose of a freshman composition class is to teach logical, grammatical “Stuffy” language. In a freshman composition class, any language that is not Stuffy language probably is ungrammatical, and therefore an error. So the question to ask is “What is the discourse intending to do?” If the discourse is intending to be

grammatical and help the student get a good grade, then it must conform to the rules of formal grammar. But if the discourse is intended to amuse or entertain the reader, then the same words can be a rhetorical device, i.e. when a freshman student says it, it's an error. When Huckleberry Finn says it, it's a rhetorical device. This is because Huckleberry Finn is a character. It's actually Mark Twain who is doing the writing, and he is using ungrammatical English in the mouth of Huckleberry Finn in order to characterize, to advance the plot, and to entertain. This is why most humor occurs in Tough or Sweet language, rather than in Stuff language.

In order to distinguish between an error and a rhetorical device, we often have a different word to describe the unintentional error and the intentional rhetorical device, as follows:

Error	Rhetorical Device
Ambiguity	Pun, Double-entendre
Cliché, Trite Expression	Idiomatic Expression
Confusion, Chaos	Enigma, Paradox
Contradiction, Incongruity	Oxymoron, Equivocation
Faulty Grammar	Anacoluthon
Faulty Parallelism	Zeugma
Imitation, Repetitiveness	Parody
Lie, Exaggeration, Embellishment	Simile, Metaphor, Analogy
Non Sequitur, Tense Shift	Flashback, One-liner, <i>In Medias Res</i>
Obscenity, Pornography	Eroticism, Innuendo
Overstatement	Hyperbole
Spelling Error	Cacography
Understatement	Litotes

Our language is filled with *Idiomatic Expressions*, like “putting your foot in your mouth,” “having two left feet,” or “kicking the bucket.” For someone learning English as a Foreign Language, these dead metaphors are actually live metaphors, until they become part of the language that feels comfortable through constant use.

Paradoxes are statements that are contradictory if they are interpreted literally. A good example is the trick statement, “This sentence is false.” If the statement is false, then it must really mean that the statement has the opposite meaning, i.e. it is true. Other examples of paradoxical statements are the Yiddish curse, “He should drop dead, God forbid” and a statement made by Epaminondas, who was a cretan and declared that “All Cretans are liars.”



The word *Oxymoron* comes from Greek *Oxy* meaning “sharp” and *moron* meaning “dull.” The word *blanket* originally meant “white” (compare *Mont Blanc* and a *blank card*). Therefore, a *black blanket* is a concealed oxymoron. Other concealed oxymorons include *young senator*, *typed manuscript*, and *old novel*.

Doggerel poetry is even more informal in the way it deals with the common elements of life, as in this poem by Ogden Nash:

I love you more than a duck can swim,  
And more than a grapefruit squirts.  
I love you more than commercials are a bore,  
And more than a toothache hurts.

(Nash also wrote the lyrics to Camille Saint-Saëns’ *Carnival of the Animals*.) Gelett Burgess wrote an equally down-to-earth poem, which is so “bad” that people call it “good.”:

I never saw a purple cow.  
I never hope to see one.  
But I can tell you anyhow,  
I’d rather see than be one.

Wherever Burgess went, people recited his famous poem to him – until one day he got so fed up that he wrote another bad/good poem:

Oh yes, I wrote “The Purple Cow.”  
I’m sorry now I wrote it.  
But I can tell you anyhow,  
I’ll kill you if you quote it.

With intentional doggerel poetry, the worse it is, the better it is. Julia Moore, “the Sweet Singer of Michigan,” was famous for her doggerel poetry, and became the model for Mark Twain’s doggerel poet Emmeline Grangerford in *Huckleberry Finn*. Mark Twain said that Julia Moore had “the touch that makes an intentionally humorous episode pathetic and an intentionally pathetic one funny.”

*Anacoluthon* is intentional faulty grammar. An example is “I like meat better than any other vegetable except ice cream.” If the faulty grammar is also faulty parallelism, this is called *Zeugma* when it is done intentionally as a rhetorical device. In a 1975 speech, Gerald Ford said that there are three major ways to be kept informed about what is going on in Washington: “The electronic media, the print media, and *Doonesbury*.” And then he added, “... not necessarily in that order.”

Edgar Allan Poe is the poet most often parodied, especially in “The Raven,” “Annabelle Lee,” and “Bells.” Here is an anonymous *parody* of “Bells”:

Hear the fluter with his flute,  
Silver flute!

Oh, what a world of wailing is awakened by its toot!  
 How it demi-semi quavers  
 On the maddened air of night!  
 And defieth all endeavors  
 To escape the sound or sight  
 Of the flute, flute, flute,  
 With its tootle, tootle, toot.  
 Of the flute, flewt, fluit, float,  
 Phlute, phlew, phlewght,  
 And the tootle, tootle, tooting of its toot.

Far-fetched analogies can also be humorous. Martin Grotjahn compares a cartoonist with a witch doctor, saying, “As in primitive societies, where the witch doctor creates a doll and uses it, by magic, to gain power over the person the doll represents, so the caricaturist hopes unconsciously to regain this magical power in his cartoon and to destroy his enemy with it.”

Even everyday common language, which is often referred to as *jargon*, can be used creatively and effectively. In the world of business, a “Candy Store Problem” is a situation involving a wide variety of choices with little basis for picking one alternative over the others. “Kangaroo Strategies” are adventurous strategies, where the entrepreneur leaps into the unknown, unsure of where he will land. And “Mouse Milking” describes a situation where an undue effort is required to accomplish a very small result.

Dylan Williams says that *Satire* is “a literary form which mixes humor, wit and a critical attitude in order to improve society” (in Helitzer, ed., 1984). His explanation relates to the fact that the original meaning of *Satire* was “a dish filled with mixed fruits.”

For *Anachronism*, consider Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which is a deconstructed dystopian novel in which Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time. On the Planet Tralfamador, all time happens simultaneously. In fact, many postmodern novels violate the expectations of time, space, and even logic itself.

Now consider *Hyperbole* or *Overstatement*. Ed Hecser says:

Comedy is to the mind what caricature is to the eye. A good caricature artist can spot those characteristics and define his subject and then exaggerate them, put a new perspective on them again, almost make them grotesque. Yet the recognizability is never destroyed. In fact, it is often enhanced. It is sometimes easier to recognize a celebrity from a well-executed caricature than from a portrait.

*Litotes* refers to intentional understatement as a rhetorical device. Garrison Keillor frequently uses *litotes* when he describes the people of Lake Wobegon as going “straight for the small potatoes. Majestic doesn’t appeal to us; we like the Grand Canyon better with Clarence and Arlene parked in front of it, smiling.”

Noam Chomsky composed a sentence that his grammar would never produce, because the words clash with each other: “Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.” Chomsky says that this sentence cannot occur in the English language. Ironically, however, every linguist in the world now uses this sentence as a “non-occurring” example. Martin Joos composed the following nonsense sentence: “I never saw a horse eat a dozen oranges.” But this sentence actually makes sense, and is most likely true, because horses don’t eat oranges.

An inept comparison is bad, but a parable, simile or analogy can be good. Martin Grotjahn compares a cartoonist with a witch doctor, saying, “As in primitive societies, where the witch doctor creates a doll and uses it, by magic, to gain power over the person the doll represents, so the caricaturist hopes unconsciously to regain this magical power in his cartoon and to destroy his enemy with it.”

A non-sequitur or a tense shift is bad, but an anachronism, flashback, one-liner or “*In Medias Res*” can be good. In Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time. On the Planet Tralfamador, all time happens simultaneously. Many postmodern novels violate the expectations of time, space, and even logic itself. One of the reasons that these novels are “deconstructed” is that the hegemony (hierarchical structuring) of society itself must be deconstructed, and then reconstructed in order to accommodate marginalized groups. Julia Kristeva describes this process in terms of how the ocean relates to the beach. The undertow of the ocean waves takes away the sand from the beach (deconstruction), but then it leaves new sand on the beach (reconstruction).

Overstatement is bad, but hyperbole (intentional understatement) can be good. Ed Hecser says, “Comedy is to the mind what caricature is to the eye. A good caricature artist can spot those characteristics and define his subject and then exaggerate them, put a new perspective on them again, almost make them grotesque.” Yet they are still recognizable, and it is “sometimes easier to recognize a celebrity from a well-executed caricature than from a portrait.”

A slip of the tongue, or an incorrect word choice, is bad. But a malapropism, a spoonerism, or a Bunkerism can be a great rhetorical device for showing how particular characters are uneducated. Mrs. Malaprop in Sheridan’s *The Rivals*, and Archie Bunker in *All in the Family*, are two examples. The Reverend James Spooner is a different type of character; he had difficulty getting his letters in the proper order. Yogi Berra and Samuel Goldwyn are also noted for the errors they make, but we suspect that making these types of “errors” was a developed skill that they practiced.

A spelling error is bad, but *Cacography* (intentionally bad writing) can be good. Mark Twain, Charles Dickens, and William Shakespeare are all “vernacular” authors. Their writing is colloquial in that many of their characters (often the strongest characters) use really bad English. But notice that when Twain

or Dickens write “wuz,” “iz,” “wer,” and “sez” instead of writing “was,” “is,” “were,” and “says,” they are writing the way people speak – not the way they write. They are demonstrating that these characters are either uneducated, or just plain colloquial.

### Points of Departure

A few years back our students had fun with a story that was passed around online under the title of “A Sad Obituary.” It was a funny little tale about “The Pillsbury Doughboy,” which is a trademark of the Pillsbury baking company. According to an article written by Robert Klara, and published in *Adweek* (December 7, 2015), the idea for the roly-poly Pillsbury Doughboy cartoon character came to a Pillsbury copywriter, Leo Perez, in 1965 after the company had designed a product of ready-to-bake biscuits and croissant rolls.

The dough for these pre-mixed rolls comes packaged in cardboard cylinders, between three and six inches in length. To protect the yeast that is in the product, the cylinders need to be refrigerated until the customer takes them home, heats the oven, and prepares a baking pan. When the customer breaks the seal by pulling on a little silver tab, a blob of white dough begins to ooze out. Then the customer can either twist the cardboard container or tap the side of it on a sharp edge, so that the white dough springs out, ready to be put directly onto the pan and into the oven.

Children love to see this “springing out” of a fully developed blob of white dough, and even adults smile, as they get the image of a fat little chef proudly presenting his product to the consumer who has only to apply the finishing touches before bringing delicious, hot bread to the table. This is the kind of imagining that led Perez to draw the fat little character who wears a chef’s hat, a cravat, a wrap-around apron, and a big smile. The Pillsbury Doughboy is such a part of the culture that we remember seeing him as one of the huge blown-up balloons that led off Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade in New York City. And of course, he appears in commercials and on the packaging of Pillsbury products. We also remember seeing him in a starring role in a television commercial designed to show people how easy it is to go through security checks at airports. The Doughboy was travelling to a baking contest and the cameras followed him as he waddled through the various lines and allowed his luggage to be X-rayed.

When we recently mentioned to a class of senior citizens meeting in the Community Center in Sun City, Arizona, that we remembered having read online a cute little story about the “Pillsbury Doughboy,” a couple of the students also remembered it, but what the class members were really interested in was making up lines of their own to put in the story. Here are the suggestions they made:

- We could add a *common tater* to the funeral program.
- The first to arrive at the funeral was *Mrs. Butterworth*, with her daughter *Little Debbie Cupcake*.
- We could say that *Pop Tart* was highly respected but that *Doughboy’s* mother was a *real tart*.
- *Mr. and Mrs. Pencil* had to be *lead* to their seats.
- *Aunt Jemima* *flipped* when she saw that she was late, but afterwards she described *Doughboy’s family* as being *positive roll models*.
- One of the speakers was *Morton Salt*, who was famous for his old saying, “*When it rains, it pours*.”
- After the funeral, the guests *wasted their dough* by meeting for further visiting at *The Granola Bar*.
- *The Hostess Twinkies* provided the music.
- The funeral was held *at 3:50 for about 20 minutes*.
- *Doughboy* was buried in a *lightly greased coffin*.

Can you think of ways to extend this metaphor, or can you think of a different subject that you could treat in this humorous way?

The formula that “Tragedy” plus Time equals Comedy has been attributed to many different scholars and writers, but it is really more hopeful than predictive. Charles Gruner, a Communications professor at the University of Georgia, is a strong advocate of the Superiority and Hostility theories of humor. In his book *The Game of Humor*, Gruner offers an award to anyone who can send him an example of humor that is not based on superiority or hostility. He makes the case that even with puns, riddles, and conundrums, there is a winner and a loser. The winner is the person who knows the answer, while the loser is the one who is made to feel foolish through being tricked by the double meaning of a pun.

In such cases, if it is an especially bad pun, the listener gets even with the joker by groaning. Celebrity roasts succeed because the person being roasted is clearly respected, and probably enjoys all the attention, even though there may be a few occasions when an insult touches a nerve. When put-down humor crosses levels of power, as when parents or teachers use it against children, or bosses use it against employees, or popular kids use it against unpopular kids, then the discomfort may outweigh the humor. When something like that happens, listeners cheer at least inwardly if the “victim” manages a snappy rejoinder.

A classic example of rejoinder humor is the exchange between George Bernard Shaw and Winston Churchill in which Shaw sent Churchill two tickets to a new play with an accompanying note, “Dear Sir Winston. Here are two tickets to the opening night of my latest play, for you and a friend, if you have one.” Churchill returned the tickets with, “Dear Mr. Shaw. Unfortunately, I am unable to attend the opening night; however, I would appreciate two tickets to the second-night performance, if there is one.” Shaw was a notorious curmudgeon, especially with aspiring authors who had the nerve to send him their manuscripts. Shaw wrote back to one author, “The covers of your book are too far apart,” and to another author, who had glued two pages together as a test to see whether or not Shaw had read the whole manuscript, Shaw responded with “You don’t have to eat a whole egg to know it’s rotten.”

One of the reasons that the Marx brothers became so popular is that people enjoyed watching just how the group members communicated with each other on stage. Harpo Marx pretended to be “mute,” and so he communicated by honks, whistles, and pantomime. He wore a fright wig and an overcoat with enormous inside pockets from which he pulled out ice cream cones, cups of coffee, and even a blow torch. Somewhere in every movie, he pulled a face called a “Gookie,” in which he puffed out his cheeks and crossed his widened eyes. Chico Marx was famous for “shooting the keys” on his piano keyboard, but the most famous Marx Brothers scene occurred in the movie *Duck Soup*. Groucho is chasing Harpo, who runs into a full-length mirror, and breaks it, but Harpo doesn’t want to own up to the misfortune. So when Groucho looks into the empty frame, Harpo is standing on the other side and deftly “reflects” back every one of Groucho’s intricate moves.

An advantage of miming is that it works in arenas that are too large or too noisy for people to hear well. This is why circus clowns and the mascots for athletic teams rely for their humor on exaggerated body movements. Clowns have a code of conduct, with one of the rules being that they should never be seen in their costumes doing “normal” things like shopping or eating. Likewise, they should not appear in public wearing only part of their costume. When at sports events or community celebrations, they should be willing to fill in dead time, provide photo opportunities, give children someone to relate to, and remember that their job is to bring happiness.

### Clowns

Clowns have a long and varied history, as shown by the fact that in all of the cultures whose humor we have studied, we have found not just one kind of clown, but many different kinds of clowns. In ancient art from Egypt going back to 2400 BC clowns, along with acrobats, jugglers, and performing animals, are pictured entertaining nobles and citizens, especially in parades. In ancient Greece, clowns had shaved heads and wore padded costumes while they presided over dramas and mime exhibitions. In parades, they would throw nuts to the crowds, sort of like today’s parade-clowns throw out candy. Roman clowns wore ragged patchwork robes and pointed hats. They had to be flexible and skilled at impromptu entertainment because they would be the ones to take the place of missing performers, and to cover up accidents and correct technical problems that might arise during parades or other large gatherings.

As you read this section, think of your own experiences of clowns, which might range from the “class clown” that you knew in elementary school, i.e. the person who made everybody – except the teacher – laugh, to the professional clown that you might have seen in a circus or presiding over a community event, or even to “the clowns” who wear business clothes as they play the role of “intellectual clown” on late-night television.



In pre-colonial America, various Indian tribes had their own kinds of clowns with humor patterns that are still seen today. For example, several tribes had clowns that English speakers would later call “Contraries” because they would groan loudly when they lifted light objects and pretend not to notice when lifting truly heavy objects. In the summer, a contrary clown might pretend to feel cold and dress in buffalo robes, while in the winter he would pretend to be warm and so would stand naked in the snow.

Other tribes had ritual clowns who would make fun of serious “religious” activities. For example, serious clowns include the Kachina dancers, which were dressed in elegant finery as they performed important tribal rituals. Still today Kachina dolls are one of the most expensive purchases that tourists can make when they come to the American Southwest. These intricately created Kachina dolls have probably been inspired by Kachina clowns, or maybe it’s the other way around in that the clowns came first, and then craftsmen tried designing and making Kachina dolls that would stress the real clowns’ characteristics.

As the ritual clowns quarreled with each other, they would stumble and fall, and even throw, or pretend to eat, filth and excrement. We have also been told that some of them set up fake gods, which they would “worship” in an exaggerated fashion, only to change their minds and beat them a few seconds later. These clowns are teaching children how not to behave, but we can’t speak for certain about these matters because non-members of many of the tribes are unwelcome at actual ceremonies.

Picturesque clowns from the Renaissance period in Europe (the beginning of the fourteenth century, well into the seventeenth century) are probably the ones most people think of when they hear about “historical” clowns. Because these clowns were such “a breath of fresh air” in a world where everyday matters were hard to manage, their images were saved in paintings and statues, and their actions were written about in stories, poems, plays, and operas. The costumes that “traditional” clowns of today wear can be traced directly back to the Renaissance court jesters, who served in the courts of kings and other rulers. They provided entertainment, but also served more serious purposes by giving kings and judges both time and alternate views on the serious matters that came before the ruler. Today, some of our late-night comedians use members of their on-stage bands or other on-stage helpers, in much the same way as royalty used to use their clowns.

The word *clown* first appeared in English during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries where it was adapted from the word *cloun* or *cloyn*, which meant “lump” or “clod.” An important part of this early “clown business” was to make sure that ordinary people did not begin to assume that the jesters (i.e. the clowns) were the ones in charge. To keep this from happening, rulers were careful to select people who were smaller than average, or perhaps maimed in some way. They might have been a dwarf or someone

who happened to be hump-backed, or had a deformed limb or perhaps an extra-long nose, “bug” eyes, or lots of frizzy hair. But in spite of having some physical defect, clowns had to be smart and quick-thinking or they couldn’t have kept up with their main job, which was to distract audiences and amuse them when a case or a decision went against whoever had come to see the ruler to ask for something. These early clowns were dressed in motley clothes, which were patched together from bright colors, and they probably wore some kind of pointed shoes and/or a pointed and colorful hat, perhaps decorated with bells.

Some of them also carried a “scepter” with a blown-up pig’s bladder or a representative doll’s head tied near the upper end. The scepter was decorated with the cord that tied the bladder or the doll’s head to the scepter, and was perhaps decorated with bells and a ribbon. One “descendant” of the blown-up pig’s bladder is the way that many of today’s clowns carry and work with various kinds of balloons. Another “descendant” is that today’s clowns often hold onto a stand-up microphone. They speak through the mike, much as Renaissance clowns would hide behind the pig’s bladder and speak through it in disguised voices so as to play different characters or to pretend that what they were saying was coming from someone else.

Only the jester was allowed to poke fun at the king or to express popular opinions through discussions with his alter ego, which was personified in the miniature “head” that was attached to the jester’s scepter. A wise king would pay close attention to the parodies, the wit, and the satire of his jester, just as today wise politicians pay attention to the jokes and the criticisms that appear in print as well as on televised comedy shows. When the political columnist Art Buchwald came to Arizona State University in the late 1980s to receive an Honorary Doctorate degree, he talked about the irony of being a modern-day clown, who was being honored for earning his living by criticizing the powers-that-be. At the time he was the most widely syndicated political satirist in America, with his column appearing in 550 newspapers.

But going back to history, by the late Middle Ages, traveling entertainers began to imitate the court jesters. And certainly in today’s world, we see entertainers doing much the same thing, although many of them are referred to as comedians rather than clowns.

Just as medieval clowns were usually of a small build, some of the world’s most famous modern comedians have been unusually short, for example Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Mickey Rooney – not to mention Martin Short, who in 1999 won a Tony Award for his part in *Little Man*. This may relate to the fact that people aren’t likely to be afraid of someone who is shorter than they are. In the 1960s, Tim Conway played Ensign Charles Parker on the television show *McHale’s Navy*. Conway also played a character named Dorf, who loved to give pompous – and very funny – lectures on golf. He would

stand in a hole and put shoes on his knees so that he could wear Bermuda shorts, which on him appeared to be long pants. He kept his balance by tipping forwards and backwards while his knuckles dragged on the ground. This kind of playfulness fits with various kinds of “small” folklore characters such as leprechauns, elves, fairies, gnomes, brownies, gremlins, and trolls, who would often provide the humor in legends and folktales.

During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Italy, as the world-famous *commedia dell’arte* was developing, three basic categories of clowns began to evolve: the Harlequin (the *Arlecchino*), the Auguste, and the Character clown. The Harlequin clown started out as a foolish servant and then developed into a more sophisticated acrobatic prankster. He carried a large board or stick that was split so that any abrupt movement would make the separated parts hit against each other with a loud noise. This is where speakers came up with the term *slapstick comedy*.

Harlequin clowns wore elegant, patched costumes with symmetrical patterns and a black domino mask covering half of their faces. Today’s Harlequin clowns (including mimes) still wear precise, neatly detailed make-up, and a sophisticated demeanor of being “in charge.” Sometimes the Harlequin clown would have a not-so-sophisticated partner, who was described as a Pierrot clown. His head was bald, his face was whitened with flour, and he played “the fool” for the Harlequin clown.

In the 1700s, Philip Astley began setting up burlesque shows, aided by horses. These equestrian shows were really the beginnings of circuses and he took them through Britain and Europe. He especially needed clowns to prepare the horses and to control them and calm them down as they moved into and out of the performance ring. And because the new “circus arenas” had to be big enough to accommodate the performing horses, the clowns had to have exaggerated make-up and use large-scale physical humor (riding, juggling, and tumbling) so as to be seen by the audience.

In 1805, Joseph Grimaldi of England first appeared as a clown named *Joey*. He is given credit for being the first true circus clown. He specialized in prat-falls, slapstick beatings, and acrobatics. In the 1860s, a different kind of clown began appearing in circuses. His was low-comedy, and he performed in baggy clothes, oversized shoes, and a big nose under the name of *Auguste*, ironically named after Rome’s Caesar Augustus. Auguste clowns wore a light-colored make-up with white only around their eyes. Their costumes included big red noses, baggy clothes, and floppy “clown” shoes. They often fell down and played the fool for the Harlequin or whiteface clowns. Lou Jacobs (1903–1992) is a famous American example. He performed for the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus for more than sixty years. His long face, topped with a tiny hat, came to be used as a symbol for the circus literature that was passed out to generations of Americans.

Toward the end of the 1800s, character clowns appeared, dressed as tramps, scarecrows, grandmothers, out-of-work gentlemen, and many other “types.” Cartoonist Thomas Nast drew a caricature of clown Dan Rice (1823–1900), who wore little make-up with his chin whiskers, tall top hat, and striped leotard costume. He was memorable because of his singing and his skills as a strong man and an animal trainer. Nast’s sketch of him became the foundation for the “Uncle Sam” image still used for the United States in drawings throughout the world.

Early Russian clowns, rather than engaging in buffoonery and wearing make-up, emphasized take-offs of famous people, facial expressions, and wordplay. Oleg Popov, who was born in 1930, became a highly admired clown who debuted with the Moscow Circus in 1949. He was called the “highest-paid ambassador” the Soviet circus ever had because his political satire both supported and ridiculed the government.

In the parts of today’s world where people are affluent enough that they don’t have to worry about where their next meal is coming from, residents fight boredom – both for themselves and for their children – by creating such characters as the Easter Bunny and Santa Claus. Even though these two characters are not usually referred to as “clowns,” their actions are much the same. These two kinds of clowns are supposed to come at night and leave goodies for children. The Easter Bunny hides decorated eggs – either real eggs that have been hard-boiled and decorated, or candy eggs that are wrapped in shiny and colorful paper. The Easter Bunny is mostly seen in pictures, but the story is that he comes at night and hides Easter eggs for good little children to find in the morning.

One of the funniest episodes that we still remember from the old television show of *Candid Camera* was the filming of several children all dressed in their fancy “Easter clothing.” The idea was that they were coming home from a religious ceremony connected to the Resurrection of Christ. And apparently the Easter Bunny had hidden dozens of eggs in a public park outside of the church. One little girl was very clever in that she just watched the other children, and as soon as they set their basket down, or were holding it behind them as they reached up, or out, for an egg hidden in a tree or a bush or down an embankment, this little girl would quietly pluck an egg out of their basket and go merrily on her way.

Santa Claus is different in that he is said to come to children’s homes during the night of Christmas Eve and fill the children’s stockings – one per child – that before bedtime had been carefully hung up, or laid out somewhere, in the family’s living room. Santa Claus leaves gifts – both large and small – mostly for the children – but in some families for all the adults as well as all the children. He is both an American and a European figure, and supposedly lives at the North Pole where he and his helper elves work all year making presents

to deliver at Christmas. He is helped with the deliveries by flying reindeer who pull his sleigh through the sky and land on the roof of each child's house. Alternate names include *Saint Nicholas*, *Saint Nick*, *Kris Kringle*, *Father Christmas*, and just plain *Santa*.

Commercial interests, of course, love to promote both of these figures. Parents seem to enjoy surprising their children – even those who are old enough to have figured out that there are simply too many contradictions in the Santa Claus story for it to be true. At Christmastime in 2016, an advice columnist for our local newspaper printed a letter from a father asking how on earth he was going to keep his 9-year-old son from “ruining” Christmas by telling his 4-year-old sister that there really isn’t a Santa Claus and that it is parents who purchase the gifts and lay them out during the night. The son had just figured out this reality when he went looking for the chimney in the house and never found one.

The columnist who answered the man's letter told the father not to worry because children are so eager to believe the Santa Claus story that they will believe it against all odds. It is one of their first experiences of “suspension of disbelief.”

Nevertheless, there are millions of photographs of distraught toddlers sitting on Santa Claus' lap. On their first visit to see “Santa Claus,” most toddlers are frightened of the man, just as they are the first time they see a clown. Stores are willing to provide these Santa Claus figures, because the parents of young children are encouraged to stand close enough to hear what the children tell Santa Claus, and then the assumption is that some time in between the original visit and Christmas, the parents will come back to that same store and purchase the gifts which they can then put in their stocking on Christmas Eve.

For many years, Don played Santa Claus and Alleen played Mrs. Santa Claus as we let the children of the ASU English Department Faculty members and graduate students select books as Christmas presents. We were amused one year when a brother and a sister each chose *It's a Book* by Lane Smith (2010). It is a humorous picture book that illustrates the difference between books and computer tablets, and ends with the edgy statement, “It's a book, Jackass.” Fortunately, we had two copies. When Santa asked them why they wanted two copies of the same book, they happily explained that they lived part-time at their grandparents' house and part-time at their parents' house, and so they wanted a copy at each house.

When we were teenagers in the 1950s, another kind of specialty clown that we saw more often in the movies than in real life was either a man or a woman hired to deliver “singing telegrams,” usually on someone's birthday. They would surprise the recipient at some public gathering. They were usually scantily clad and would somehow manage to find a way to embarrass the recipient, who was usually surprised at work or at a restaurant where they were with friends in celebration

of their birthday or some other achievement. Obviously, it was the people they were with who had arranged the “surprise” visit. Today’s specialty clowns are more likely to be hired to pass out advertisements or to welcome individuals to events at shopping centers or to appear as comedy speakers or performers at all kinds of gatherings, including birthday parties and school or community carnivals for children.

Here in Arizona, we recently went to a festival held at the Community Arts Complex in Mesa, a city close to Tempe. It was on a Sunday afternoon just after Halloween and was part of our Hispanic Community’s celebration of the Day of the Dead or (*Día de los Muertos*). We saw dozens of specialty clowns filling all kinds of roles. They performed with a group of dancers and were characters in a play that we didn’t understand because it was all in Spanish, and moved more quickly than did our English-speaking brains. The clowns, who did not look at all like circus clowns, were happy to pose for pictures and to explain the meanings of the altars, the marigold flowers, and the sugar skulls, as well as the cartoons and the artwork that included Mexican engravings done in the style of José Guadalupe Posada (1852–1913). You can go online and find samples of his distinctive work, which is filled with skeletons in unexpected places and poses. As *Gringos*, i.e. non-Hispanics, we were made to feel welcome for the “fun parts” of the celebration, but we had the feeling that we wouldn’t have been so welcome at more private events such as visits to a relative’s grave site, or being part of a ceremony “communicating” with the deceased.

The big news that recently happened in the “clown” business occurred on January 14, 2017, when Kenneth Feld, chairman and CEO of Feld Entertainment, announced that after 146 years of continuous performances Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey circus would make its final performance in May of 2017. Our local newspaper printed a small announcement on January 16, which described the closing as “a victory for animal rights activists” who have for many years criticized the way that circuses treat animals. More than a year earlier, PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) and other organizations were responsible for the circus placing its elephants in the Center for Elephant Conservation in central Florida. The circus was now working to find homes for scores of lions, tigers, camels, and other animals. Feld argued that the circus did not mistreat its animals by pointing to the fact that in 2014 he won a multimillion-dollar settlement against the Humane Society and other activists. “We won in court,” Feld said, “but obviously in the court of public opinion we didn’t prevail.” This statement was based on how the number of tickets being sold had steadily declined over the past decade.

He argued that the closing of the circus was not “a win for animal rights activists or for anyone.” Approximately 400 people faced losing their jobs. Also, the many people who lived on one of Feld’s two-mile-long trains now needed help in finding housing, as well as jobs. He explained that transporting

the show by rail “and other circus quirks – such as providing a traveling school for performers’ children – are throwbacks to another era ... the traditional circus is a different mode that simply does not work in today’s world, where we still have to maintain an affordable ticket price.”

We read several news stories about the event, including one in which Kenneth Feld said that today we have a world of specialization. He gave as an example the fact that once we had only three TV stations, while today we have dozens – or even hundreds – which include a food channel and a golf channel. Today’s entertainment has to offer choices. Then he pointed out that, “This week we had 26 tours going around the world. Only two of these were Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey [circuses]. The company is a robust company and we are always looking at new entertainment. ... The circus is the future until May, then it will be part of our glorious past.”

More information on the changing roles of clowns can be found online under such titles as “World Clown Association,” “Clowns of America, International,” the “International Shrine Clown Association,” the “International Clown Hall of Fame,” the “Clown Forum,” and the “Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor.” These organizations provide printed materials as well as training and encouragement for a wide variety of clowns. Some groups hold conventions and workshops, where members share what they have learned with other professionals.

Officials from these organizations are usually the ones to protest when they judge that people are doing damage to the concept of clowns and humor. For example, one Halloween in Paulsboro, New Jersey, a police officer dressed up as a clown and visited the homes of individuals who were wanted for routine traffic offenses. He managed to get inside the homes of twelve offenders so he could personally deliver their overdue “Summons to Court.” Real clowns protested this misuse of their profession. As another example, in 1976 when Senator Bob Dole was the Republican nominee for President, he referred to his opponent, Bill Clinton, as “a Bozo.” Larry Harmon, the creator of the franchised *Bozo* television program, let national news know that he didn’t think there was anything funny about having his program’s name used as an insult.

### **Humor and Hostility**

Even though humor and hostility are “opposites,” they are also close relatives. Here in the Western United States, which was settled by ranchers and farmers making *barbed wire* fences, we know a thing or two about *barbs*. One kind comes on wire fences, while the other kind comes in jokes. Barbed wire is designed to have sharp little barbs about every ten inches so that farmers and cattlemen can build fences by setting wooden posts firmly into the ground at intervals of about eight to ten feet and then stretching three or four strands



of barbed wire between the posts. The barbs keep animals, as well as people, from easily climbing through or crossing over into someone else's property. If it hadn't been for the invention and selling of barbed wire, the settlement of America's Midwest and Western states would have been an even more contentious process than it was because there would have been constant fighting over who owned the animals or the crops that soon covered the land.

Barbs in jokes also provide a kind of fence as they allow people to create original jokes and to make fun of each other, but only to send a warning, not to really hurt someone. One of the hardest things for comedians to learn is how to create a barb, without really hurting the person who is receiving the "barb." As long as we were telling "canned" jokes, we didn't have to worry as much, but now that many of us are being way more creative and creating jokes out of immediate situations, we need to be more careful. Some of our friends who used to be enthusiastic members of Toastmasters International now have children who are enrolling in Improv classes. These are available in most cities and one of our friends told us that when her son enrolled, the first instruction the teacher gave him was "Don't be funny."

The teacher went on to talk about being present and responding and saying "yes" to whatever his acting partner was doing. Our friend was impressed at how much the instructor focused on the necessity of building a foundation, out of which the humor could arise. We were surprised at this because we – along with other humor scholars – have acknowledged that there is a strong feeling of comradeship that goes along with group-created joking, but we had assumed that the jokes were creating the feelings of comradeship. However, the action of her son's group leader in stressing the importance of first developing a strong feeling of companionship made us ask ourselves if we had it backwards. Perhaps the jokes can only come after the group has developed feelings of comradery and friendship.

### **The Scary Clowns of 2016**

Another surprise that we experienced in the late Summer and the Fall of 2016 was an epidemic of news stories about "scary" or "creepy" clowns suddenly appearing all around the world. The phenomenon is thought to have started in Green Bay, Wisconsin when at 2:00 am on August 1, 2016, residents began calling police to report a disheveled and creepy-looking clown walking through the city. He was in full-face make-up with high eyebrows, hollow eyes, and black paint around an exaggerated smile. He carried four black balloons and was dressed in a rumpled jump suit with a big ruffled collar. The next day, a fan Facebook page popped up referring to him as *gagstheclown*. One of the commenters on the page said that *Gags* was so scary that if she happened to meet

him, she would curl into the fetal position and die from her “heart exploding from pure terror.”

People first assumed that someone was in town making a horror film, but no one ever saw a real camera crew, although a couple of murky snapshots were posted on the Facebook page. Eventually, the idea of it being an advertisement for a private film proved true when in the Fall it was announced that *Gags – The Green Bay Clown* would be shown on Thursday, January 26, 2017, as part of the *Dead of Winter* Horror Short Film Festival in Chicago. In August, when people had called the Green Bay Police Department, Captain Kevin Warych had responded in a low-key fashion, explaining that it’s perfectly legal for a person to “walk in a clown costume anywhere he wants.” The Chief was surprised when the incident “went viral.”

It happened to be part of a quickly developing set of stories about “Creepy,” “Scary,” and “Killer” clowns. People who knew that Steven King’s book *It*, which stars a scary clown named *Pennywise*, was being filmed, tried to tie the stories into his project, but when he was interviewed King denied any connection with *Gags*, but did say that clowns are inherently scary. As evidence, he pointed out that if you show a clown to a toddler – even a friendly looking clown – the child is probably going to scream.

The first mainstream news story that we saw about the scary clowns was in *USA Today* (September 28, 2016). It was a four-column story, featuring a large photograph from Getty Images of a female clown rising out of a misty cloud. She (or he) wore a long-sleeved dress, decorated with diamond patches and a large, ruffled, white collar. She wore a fright wig and her face was painted white to make the black outlines of her mouth, nose, and ears stand out. Costumes described in other news stories varied from professional clown costumes to regular, but shabby, clothes that covered the whole body. Black and white seemed to be the favorite colors, supplemented with frizzy wigs (often red) and with either a clown mask, heavy face paint, or a scarf covering most of the face. Some carried ominous signs. One read “WEARECOMINGTOCALL” while another had the word “Killer” written on his forehead. Commonly carried items included blown-up balloons, hand guns, knives, and baseball bats. At least a couple of incidents were reported when the clown was carrying a garden hoe over his shoulder, while a few others carried chainsaws. One clown carried only a briefcase, but this left his potential victims to imagine what awful thing was hidden in the case.

On October 12, 2016, newspapers carried a story under the headline, “Ronald McDonald takes a break amid creepy clown scares.” The McDonald’s Corporation announced that they “are mindful of the current climate around clown sightings in communities” and so are “being thoughtful with respect to Ronald McDonald’s participation in community events for the time being.”

Over the next couple of months, we read many news stories about creepy clowns. They were mostly males ranging in age from 12 to full adulthood. By the end of 2016, Wikipedia had thirty-two pages filled with short (three- or four-line) write-ups from around the world. Schools forbade the wearing of clown costumes to Halloween parties, while others allowed costumes but said that the wearers' faces had to be visible. The Target department stores (one of the largest chains in the United States) withdrew all of the clown masks it had planned to sell for Halloween on October 31. And although we didn't see printed statistics on the matter, judging from our own neighborhood, fewer children went out on Halloween night (also called "Beggars' Night") to knock on the doors of their neighbors and say "Trick or Treat."

For at least the past two generations, this had been a popular custom in American suburban homes for children to dress in their Halloween costumes and knock on the doors of their neighbors asking for candy treats. People in middle-class neighborhoods sometimes complained about parents from poorer neighborhoods bringing a carload of trick-or-treaters (mostly teenagers) to their neighborhoods and arranging to come back and pick up their children in a couple of hours after they had filled their collection bags with candy.

Of course, candy manufacturers have worked hard to promote the "trick-or-treat" custom which guarantees huge candy sales all through October. This year, children who went "Trick or Treating" were most likely accompanied by their parents, while in some towns and neighborhoods, school and church groups arranged substitute parties. A community church in our neighborhood had a "Trunk-or-Treat" party. Parents backed their cars into a large circle around the church building. They had already decorated the trunks of their cars, and provided some kind of light in the trunk to show the "goodies" they had brought. Children of all ages, along with their nostalgic parents, walked around showing off their costumes, and stopping at each car for conversation and "trick or treating." Other refreshments and games were also arranged on the church lawn.

In contrast to this happy story, here are a few of the more unusual incidents described on the Wikipedia pages in the fall of 2016:

- A story on October 6, under the heading "Second Amendment for the Win: Woman Draws Gun, Scares Away Creepy Clown," told about a woman in Auburn, Maine, who was relaxing in a chair on her front porch when an SUV drove up and stopped in front of her house. A man in the back seat dressed as a clown put up his fingers in the shape of a gun and said "Bang!" She had a real gun with her, which she pulled out from under her lawn chair and pointed at him. The SUV immediately left the scene.
- Also on October 6, clowns in Ontario, Canada, sent an Instagram message saying: "We are coming to London Ontario's high schools and surrounding

areas. We are going to kidnap students and behead teachers, we're not clowning around."

- On the same day, a newspaper in Mexico City printed a photo and wrote that two clowns were found dead in Ecatepec, a suburb of Mexico, City, possibly due to being beaten to death after scaring people. The report turned out to be false when someone recognized the photograph because it had already been published as part of a story about two clowns murdered in Guatemala in March of 2015.
- In Moore, Oklahoma, on October 7, where two individuals clad in clown attire had been hanging around in a neighborhood playground and scaring children, several residents approached the men and warned them of the serious consequences they could face. One of the men ran away, but the other one stayed and listened. Then he took off his clown costume and left the park.
- Also on October 7, 2016, a couple living in Menasha, Wisconsin dressed up as clowns and went out to scare people. They were arrested, but not for dressing up as clowns, but for leaving their 4-year-old child home alone.
- On October 12, 2016 a man in Blackburn, Lancashire, told police he was tackled by a knife-wielding clown wearing a green wig and a "silky green tracksuit with yellow lines down the sleeves, and long, Gothic black boots." After further questioning, the police arrested the man for wasting their time, because it turned out that he had cut himself by falling on some broken glass and then fabricated the clown attack.
- In Connecticut on October 13, New Britain High School was placed on lockdown after a 35-year-old woman and a 39-year-old man were arrested for a breach of the peace. They were wearing clown masks and blaring loud music as they drove a car around the school campus.
- In mid-October at St. Bonaventure University in New York, school officials requested that students not take matters into their own hands when confronting potentially dangerous situations. The students had created a sign-up sheet for an "Anti-Clown Army," which the police thought was an invitation for trouble.
- *TIME* magazine, October 17, devoted almost a whole page to a story entitled "America's New Clown Panic." It was illustrated with a full-color photo of three clown masks, with one being the "scary" kind. The editors wrote, "It's easy to dismiss events like these as funny or amusing, especially given their proximity to Halloween. But the hysteria they're creating is very real." Threats (both real and imagined) put a Massachusetts college on lockdown, led hundreds of students at Penn State to go clown-hunting, and elicited a response from White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest, who said, "Obviously this is a situation that law enforcement is taking quite seriously." The magazine went on to explain that in the 1980s, John Wayne Gacy, who sometimes

dressed as a clown, was convicted of thirty-three murders. Officials have tried to ease “this new wave of fear,” but 22-year-old Jordan Jones, who works as a clown named Snuggles at a haunted house in Maryland, said that he was afraid someone will “take a swing” at him when he was in costume. He started a “Clown Lives Matter” movement on his Facebook page.

- An undated note from Minnesota told about a 15-year-old girl creating a “Kroacky Klow’n” Facebook profile, which made threats to “kill” in Bloomington and other cities. When police interviewed the girl, she explained she had created the profile on her young sister’s phone to scare her boyfriend, but “the situation got out of control and went ‘viral!’”

The longest and most interesting article that we found was written by Bess Lovejoy for the *New York Times* (October 15, 2016). It was entitled “What Do the Scary Clowns Want?” One of Lovejoy’s main points was that the clown sightings are a kind of “Urban Legend,” and that modern stories about creepy clown sightings date back to May, 1981, when the term “phantom clowns” was devised. Sightings in 1985 and in 1991 described the clown as looking like Homey D. Clown from the TV series “In Living Color.” No such clowns were ever found, which is why she compares the phantom clowns to the urban legends described by Jan Harold Brunvand in his 1981 book *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*. There are several definitions of “Urban Legends,” but the one that best fits the current situation is that the stories are “enduring rumors about improbable events, usually with a humorous or macabre element, that are spread by word of mouth.”

We recently gave a talk at a meeting of senior citizens at one of Arizona’s most affluent retirement communities. Our assigned subject was political humor in the news. We started with a PowerPoint of old cartoons and jokes, and then worked our way up to contemporary stories, including politics, and near the end of our presentation we mentioned how today there are many young people – especially young men – who are disappointed in life. They aren’t in school, nor do they have jobs that challenge and excite them, so they are bored and are suffering from a feeling of ennui. At this point, someone quipped, “Yeah – like us retirees!”

Of course everyone – including us – laughed, and then we returned to our prepared talk where we wanted to propose that at least some of the instances of young people going out in public as Scary Clowns was simply a way for the perpetrators to get a rush of adrenalin and to feel that their lives truly matter, as proven by the chances they are taking when they set out to frighten people.

By now, our group was in a jovial mood and someone wanted to know if we were suggesting that they too should make their hearts beat a little faster by planning and executing a Scary Clown event. “Of course not!” we argued. “We’re all too slow and stiff to make a getaway.”

Everybody laughed, and then someone made a comment that stopped us in our tracks. He said that perhaps for today's adults the equivalent to pulling a "Scary Clown stunt" is simply going to the polls and "voting dangerously," i.e. casting your votes for the most unpredictable candidates or for whoever promises to bring the most changes. Fortunately, we were near the end of our allotted time, so we didn't have to take on such a discussion, but we suspect that we aren't the only ones from the group who are still pondering this man's observation.

### Points of Departure

1. Go online and check the news for the last year to see if you can find any stories about "Creepy Clowns" or "Scary Clowns" in your own neighborhood. If so, compare them to the ones written about in this chapter. If you don't find such stories, try to figure out what caused such a social change in a relatively short period of time.
2. In *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Lewis Gates suggests that all marginalized groups have insider words that are not understood by mainstream culture. When these marginalized groups – women, blacks, Chicanos, gays, etc. – use these insider words, they are said to be "signifying." In other words, they are using "insider" language perhaps in hopes that someone in the group will recognize that they have something in common with the new person and will therefore extend a hand of friendship. Try to think of one or two "insider words" that might be connected either to your religion, to where you live, to the work that your parents do, or to the part of town where you live.
3. Here are the titles of a few prize-winning books written for young adults. They all include humor, much of which is related to the fact that the protagonists are made to feel like "outsiders." Choose one of the books to read and then report on how the author treats the protagonist's feelings as he or she adjusts to new situations, new friends, and new challenges. Give at least a couple of examples showing how the author created humor, but without making you as the reader feel that that the author was "making fun" of the young protagonist.

*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie. Little, Brown 2007. Or *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fist Fight in Heaven* by Sherman Alexie. Grove Press, 2005.

*Are You There, God?, It's Me, Margaret* by Judy Blume. Bradbury, 1970.

*Dead End in Norvelt* by Jack Gantos. Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2011.

*The Fault in Our Stars* by John Greene. Penguin, 2012.

*Lemony Snicket: The Unauthorized Autobiography* by Lemony Snicket (né Daniel Handler). Harper, 2002.

Any of the Harry Potter books by J. K. Rowling. Scholastic, beginning in 2003.

*The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan. Random House, 1989.



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